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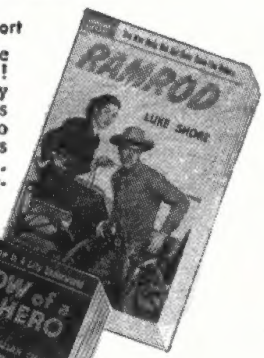

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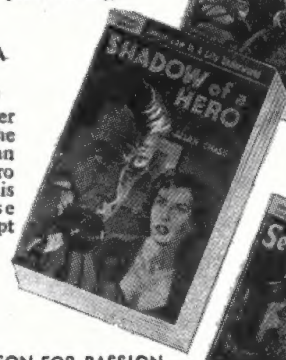

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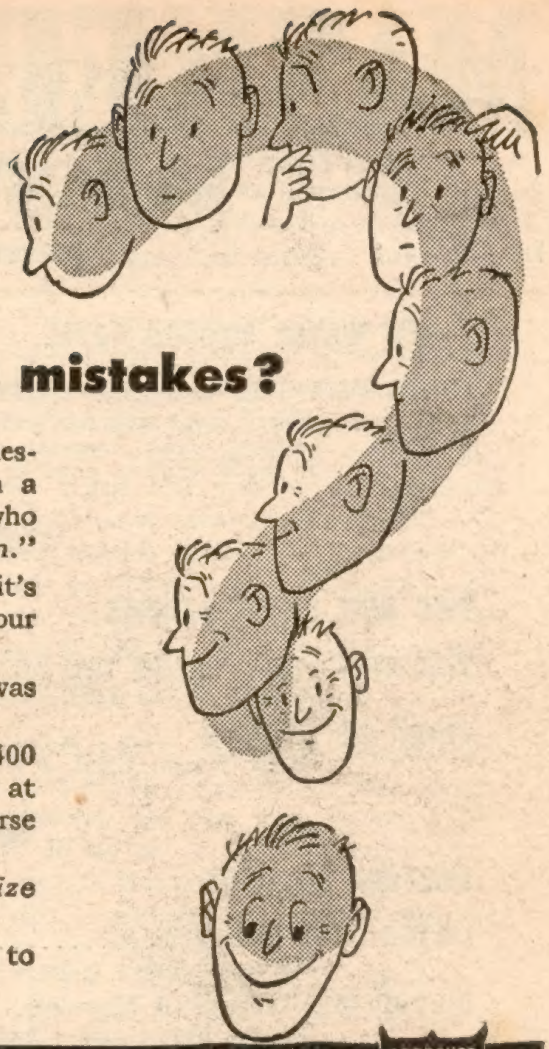

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A department of true tales concerning the courageous men who found excitement, adventure, and sometimes death in their quest for gold

Conducted by JOHN A. THOMPSON

AMONG those who followed the Rainbow Trail in search of gold few were luckier than Henry Wickenburg—or, in a way, unluckier. Henry discovered a fabulous ledge of bonanza ore that later became the famous Vulture Mine, perhaps the richest single gold mine uncovered in Arizona. Estimates of the Vulture's gold output run from ten million dollars up. Not bad for an ex-government teamster on his first try.

When Henry started out from Tucson to hunt for yellow metal in the Hassayampa River country he knew little about prospecting, and nothing at all about gold mining. That was back in the early 1860's when prospecting was a grim catch-as-catch-can game the gold hunters played with local bands of raiding, blood-thirsty Apaches.

Indians didn't faze Henry. The stocky, stolid teamster had encountered them often enough in his job hauling army freight to the military post at Tucson. His scarred body bore the bullet wounds to prove it.

Once Wickenburg and the prospecting party he had joined reached the Hassayampa River, Henry began to show his preference for unorthodox methods of gold hunting. While his companions tested the river sands for placer gold, Wickenburg moved off to the desert and sat down in the shade of a mesquite clump. Comfortably settled, he did some brain-figgerin'.

His friends were getting a few colors, gold that, eons past, nature had washed into the river bed. That gold must have come from somewhere. Henry stared off at the hills, absently at first. Gradually his gaze focused on a giant cream white formation of rock that striped across the nearest butte.

That formation could be quartz. And quartz, Henry had heard, was a rock in which lode gold often occurred. Toward evening when the desert became a little cooler, the shrewd teamster roused himself and walked over to the white-striped hill.

Foolish dreaming, wishful thinking perhaps. But his burro had wandered off in that direction, and he wanted to catch the animal to picket it before nightfall. Henry returned with the burro and some samples from the white formation. It *was* quartz.

Next morning Wickenburg crushed some of his samples in a hand mortar and panned the powdered rock in the river. With every sample he tested a string of yellow gold feathered out behind the iron sands left in his pan.

Jubilant, Henry showed his gold to the experienced prospectors and pointed off to the hill across the desert. The prospectors were unimpressed.

"Just a few colors of free gold, Henry," they said. "Nothing to get excited about. Besides, how would you work a mine back in the desert miles from water?"

The miners broke further glum news to Wickenburg. The river placer gold they had found was too lean to bother with, the whole place too wild and dangerous to linger in.

Henry shrugged. He wasn't quitting. His companions begged him not to be a bigger jackass than his burro and to pull out with them while he still had his scalp, but Wickenburg could be as stubborn as any mule he had ever skinned.

By midday Henry was alone in the desert. That evening, he set up his one-man camp at the base of his gold-bearing outcrop.

A few days later, his burro loaded with ore samples, Wickenburg made his way across the mountains to Prescott, fifty miles north. There he looked up a friend of his, Charles Genung, one of the Southwest's greatest pioneer mining men. Genung assayed Henry's samples.

Genung went back to the desert with Henry. He wanted to see whether the outcrop proved to be what the samples showed.

Camped by Wickenburg's claim, Genung showed Henry how to build a Mexican *arrastre* that would grind his ore and recover the free gold. He picked the site for the *arrastre,* too, down by the Hassayampa River sixteen miles away near where the town of Wickenburg now stands.

The first ton of ore Henry put through his crude mill netted him over a hundred dollars in gold. Other lots averaged better, some less.

Genung returned to Prescott. Wickenburg stayed at the Vulture. But it was hard work hauling his rock sixteen miles, then grinding it. Besides, small bands of Apaches were beginning to raid his camp. Henry sat down to think. When he got up he was satisfied.

First erecting a big sign beside his claim, he made a trip to Tucson. The sign in the desert read: *Good Gold Ore. $15 a Ton.*

In Tucson Henry spread the news. Local prospectors could come to the Vulture and dig out all the guaranteed gold rock they wanted for fifteen dollars a ton, cash. Henry figured the Apaches wouldn't be so likely to attack a whole camp as a lone man.

The scheme worked. Some of the early Vulture ore ran better than $200 a ton. The average was about $40.

Wickenburg built up as a permanent camp. Larger operators got into the picture, hauling Vulture ore up to Prescott in wagonloads and paying Henry the regular fee.

Eventually an Eastern syndicate heard about the amazing one-man property that was fast becoming Arizona's most famous gold mine. They dickered, bought Henry out and started developing the property in earnest, mining gold ore out of the rich vein in million-dollar quantities.

Henry looked around awhile, then purchased a beautiful valley ranch near Wickenburg. It was what he had always wanted.

But Fate had a joker up her sleeve, and in 1890 she played it. That year a dam under construction on the Hassayampa River gave way, following a terrific rainstorm. Eighty lives were lost in the resulting flood.

Wickenburg's ranch was covered with a layer of sand and rocks that ruined it forever for further cultivation. Old and heartsick, Henry shut himself up in his house near Walnut Grove.

Then in 1906 at sunset on his eighty-eighth birthday Henry Wickenburg stepped outside his door for a last look at his useless acres—and shot himself.

Today the bustling town of Wickenburg shows up in blackface type on all the maps of Arizona. Not far away a range of desert hills is known as the Wickenburg Mountains.

And nearly everybody has forgotten Henry.

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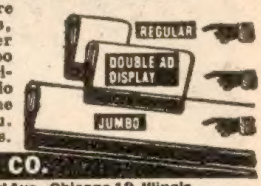

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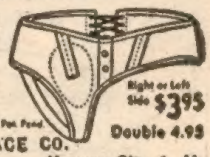

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by D. B. NEWTON

CHAPTER I

Masked Marauder

THE STAGE from Dutchman's Camp was carrying no specie this trip. But so many terrible happenings had occurred during the past weeks that the whip, a leather-lunged,

The Masked Rider's phantom double brings havoc to Blue Spruce

sandy-mustached veteran named Bill Hawkins, felt uneasy, handling the ribbons with a jumpy feeling that the back of his checkered shirt made a big round target.

He kept his six horses at a hard pace along the shelving mountain trail. His watery blue eyes, darting and probing the shadowed timber that flashed past the careening stage coach, kept watch incessantly to catch the sign of lurking riders, of gleaming guns, and in particular one awesome figure in black garments.

Not ordinarily stampeded by legends and rumors of danger, Hawkins was plain scared today. For his luck, he figured, was about due to run out. So far, he had missed tangling with the mysterious raiders who seemed bent on crippling Sanderson Stages, his employers, but two other men—good men, both his friends, both loyal hands—lay in fresh pine boxes because they had tried to protect the stages and shipments entrusted to them. Bill Hawkins' own number might come up at any time.

Inside the swaying coach were four anxious passengers, headed for the foothills town of Blue Spruce. They, too, were in deadly fear of the masked bandit and his gang. One or two more attacks upon the stage line, Bill Hawkins figured, and people would refuse to ride a Sanderson coach. And he couldn't blame them.

The stage took a steep hairpin curve, down through thick-standing ranks of pungent pine and spruce, with the high, barren granite peaks shouldering into the alpine blue of the morning sky. And then, suddenly, Bill was standing on the brake and throwing his weight against the ribbons, yelling at his horses to bring them to a stand.

As the coach rocked to a halt on its braces, a voice called shakily:

"What is it? Why are we stopping?"

Bill didn't answer—only sat there on the box staring at what was ahead of him in the road. Up at Dutchman's Camp, the station boss had told him when he pulled out, "There's a supply wagon overdue from below. Keep an eye open for it, will you?"

Bill Hawkins had found it. It blocked the narrow trail, slewed half across it, The canvas sheeting had been ripped to shreds, and boxes and barrels lay scattered where they had been hurled from the wagon-bed, as though in hasty ransacking. The six-mule team lay in harness, bloated shapes, tumbled in the ruts of the road where lead had put them.

And up on the seat of the wagon, in a grotesque sprawl lay—

ON LEGS that hardly seemed willing to hold him up, Bill Hawkins came shakily scrambling from his perch. The passengers, spilling out of the stage-coach, hauled up in gaping horror. Hawkins ran forward, climbed the big front wheel of the wrecked wagon and laid a hand on the driver.

The man was lifeless, already stiffening. He had been shot in the chest. Blood smeared Bill's fingers, sickened him. He had known the man—another Sanderson teamster. Three dead, now!

Then, though revolted by the carnage, he saw the stub of pencil clutched in the dead driver's hand. He saw the piece of paper anchored by the man's weight—a way-bill that he had snatched from his pocket in his dying effort to make an accusation. The scrawl read:

Six of them Leader wore black mask and cape—

The writing, almost illegible, ended there as strength had failed the dying man, but the few words were sufficient to tell the story.

"Chalk up another one!" gritted Bill Hawkins, too worked up to feel any elation at having once more been spared the same fate himself. "Tally another killin' for the Masked Rider—the black-robed son of Satan! He'll swing for this yet. . . ."

Victim to an Impostor, Wayne Morgan Rides In!

In the county seat town of Blue Spruce, at the edge of the lava hills, a man and a girl heard the stage come tearing in and their glances met in a look of mutual dread and understanding. The lovely blue eyes of the girl, Patricia Sanderson, clouded.

"Oh, Ben!" she choked, almost in a whisper. "What do you suppose— Has it happened again?"

The handsome, bronzed features of her rancher companion, Ben Hubbard, owner of the Block H brand, went grim. He came to his feet with a single easy movement, sweeping his wide-brimmed Stetson from Pat's desk in the office where they were sitting.

"Come on!" he said.

His hand was on her arm, comforting and reassuring, as they hurried out of the headquarters of Sanderson Stages. Her bright blonde head came only to his solid shoulder, though Pat was not a small girl. They hurried across the yard, past the freight sheds and the row of white-canvased wagons, and anxiety matched her pace to his long, swinging stride.

Under the arched gateway they were joined by Pat's father, old Ward Sanderson, who had built this business from nothing to a freight empire that served a wide-flung cattle and mining region. He came hurrying from the barn, his seamed face thunderous. He was bellowing for Mike Cottrell, his yard boss.

WAYNE MORGAN

"Where is the man? Ain't anybody seen him? I don't know what good he does me if he ain't around when I need him!"

"Dad!" cried Pat. "The stage is in. I think there's something wrong!"

"Of course there's somethin' wrong!" the old man snapped impatiently. "Bill Hawkins went right past the station and pulled up at the sheriff's office. It can only

mean one thing. And Mike Cottrell not even here!"

Already a crowd was converging on the sheriff's office, racing through the slowly settling dust that the big coach had lifted. As Pat, her father, and Ben Hubbard neared, they heard the excited babble of voices.

"Dang it all," Sheriff Joe Wake's voice was making rasping complaint above the others, "can't you move back and give 'em a chance to get that thing out of the coach?"

Ben Hubbard, seeing what Bill Hawkins and a couple of other men were unloading through the door of the stage, moved quickly to keep Pat from seeing.

"Don't look!" he told her anxiously.

But she had already seen. She gasped, and her face went white. She seized Ben Hubbard's arm as though to steady herself.

"Another man killed!" she moaned.

The tobacco-chewing sheriff was incapable of getting order from that excited crowd, seemed as bewildered as he was incompetent. But old Sanderson and Hubbard managed to get Bill Hawkins inside the lawman's office, with the door closed long enough for him to pour out his story.

SANDERSON fingered the crude note which had been found under the dead man's body and his mouth was tight-clamped behind his grizzled, close-cropped mustache.

"This thing is even worse than it looks on the surface, Joe," he told the sheriff. "There was money in that wrecked wagon —the bi-weekly pay-roll to the Syndicate Mines at Dutchman's Camp. After the way this Masked Rider has seemed to be able to spot the coaches carrying money and pick them off, I tried pullin' a blind on him by sendin' the strong-box up in a load of wagon supplies, unguarded. Somehow he saw through the trick. Don't ask me how!"

"Unless," said the sheriff, "there's a leak somewhere."

"Oh, that couldn't be!" cried Pat Sanderson. "Our men are loyal. I just can't believe there'd be a traitor in the outfit!"

"If there is," her father said grimly, "we'll dig him out and string him up alongside this robed hellion who's killin' my drivers and lootin' my stages! But right now"—he spoke brusquely to the sheriff—"I want a posse, Joe. We'll probably have no better luck than we did before, trying to spot a trail through those lava hills. But every minute we stand here talkin', whatever trail there may be is gettin' colder!"

"Right," said Joe Wake, and turned to get his belt and gun from a nail above his desk.

"Count me in, Sheriff!" Ben Hubbard said.

He had been in town most of the day, waiting to see Lawyer Caleb Gorham on business. But Gorham had not shown up, so Hubbard had spent the time, as he usually did when he was in town, at the freight office with Pat Sanderson.

"You'll be all right, won't you, if you're left alone?" he asked her anxiously.

"Of course," she said quickly. "But look out for yourself. And you too, Dad! If you should run into anything—"

"It ain't likely!" muttered the sheriff, heading for the door to round up his posse among the milling townsmen outside. "We ain't apt to tangle with a phantom, and it's a cussed black ghost we'll be chasin'."

A little later, standing at the edge of the dusty street, Pat watched them ride out, staring after them until the knot of riders blended with the foothill timber and their dust cloud melted and settled. Then, under a heavy burden of dejection, she returned to the freight office and sat down at her desk, her thoughts a turmoil of images, uselessly repeating themselves.

The man who had been killed today—the new loss of the mine payroll—Sheriff Wake's suggestion of a traitor in the Sanderson organization. This last idea was so horrible that she tried to shake it from her mind by turning to the account books which were her especial charge. But the story they had to tell of the inroads a

strange, masked enemy was making upon the Sanderson business added nothing to her peace of mind.

She stayed at the desk through the rest of the day, waiting for the posse's return. She left it once to get some supper for which she had no appetite, and once to ask at the freight barn if Mike Cottrell had ever showed up. There was no sign of the yard boss, she was told. She went back to work, puzzling over this and a little bothered by it.

It was strange, the way Mike had taken to disappearing lately. He always had some logical reason for his absence, and yet—

She put the gnawing suspicion away from her. Mike Cottrell had been with them for three years. He had turned surly of late, but she had always had confidence in him, and liked him. She wouldn't let herself become suspicious of her friends.

IT WAS full dark when the posse returned, straggling in from the hills, empty-handed. The trail they had sought had soon dissolved to nothing in the trackless lava hills. Ward Sanderson and Ben Hubbard came into the office. The old man threw a dusty hat onto his battered desk and stood scowling at it. He was tired from long hours in the saddle and his face was bleak with his thoughts.

"All right, Mr. Masked Rider!" he said in a voice that was vibrant with feeling. "I've heard a hundred yarns about you! I've heard you were some kind of a Robin Hood outlaw that helped the poor against the lawless, and I've heard other things that wasn't so flatterin'. I reckon now I've found out which to believe! And if I ever get the chance to notch my sights on your black mask, you black-hearted killer, I'll shoot you like I would a—" His shoulders drooped, the spirit ran out of his voice and left it tired and beaten. He turned to the door.

"Another day, tomorrow," he said, without hope. "We lost today's round. But maybe things'll change. Comin' to the house, Pat?"

"One minute, Dad," she told him, her tone lifeless. "I've something I must say to Ben, first."

The young man must have caught the inflection of her words. He was looking at her with a deep concern as she turned to face him.

"What is it?" he demanded.

"This, Ben." Slowly she took an engagement ring from her finger and held it out to him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I've got to give it back."

"You—you can't mean it!" he cried, searching her eyes, not moving to touch the ring.

"It has to be," she insisted. "Until this horrible thing is settled, one way or another. As long as things remain as they are, it isn't fair to you, Ben!"

"I won't take it!" he cried indignantly.

She took his hand and dropped the ring into it. He looked at it shining against his rope-callused palm. Then his fists knotted into hard balls and his jaw was firm as he lifted his eyes to hers.

"This Masked Rider," he said tightly. "I don't care if he's Satan himself! If I ever get within reach of him, I'll kill him with my own hands. That's a promise!"

He left the words to vibrate in the stillness, as he strode from the building.

CHAPTER II

A Man Named Morgan

A COUPLE of days later, toward the tail end of a quiet afternoon, a stranger drifted into Blue Spruce town.

He came up from the flats, a tall man on a hammer-headed roan saddler, an easy-riding wanderer with a trail pack lashed behind his cantle and no apparent destination in mind. He rode into a livery barn and told the crippled hostler to rub the bronc down and give him a bait of grain.

"Don't know how soon I'll be wantin' him," he said. "I've been on the trail plenty, the last few weeks, and I wouldn't mind settlin' a while." He looked around.

Bill was standing on the brake, yelling at his horses

"This place has the appearance of bein' a quiet little town. Not too much excitement."

The hostler shot him a fierce and bitter look. "It does, huh?" he said, and spat at the ground.

The tall man didn't seem to notice. He appeared to be thinking. "There's cattle outfits hereabouts, ain't there?" he asked.

"Yeah. And minin', back in the hills. Eastern Syndicate owns a bunch of properties there, though most of 'em have been

closed down for years. Haven't been profitable to operate, since the first rich veins played out. Still, there's a few jobs to be had."

"What about the freightin' outfit that has the big yards up at the edge of town? Would they need any help?"

The drifter's question got him a slow, careful survey from sharp and piercing eyes. They raked the length of his tall, broad-shouldered frame that tapered down at the hips from years in the saddle. They lingered on the matched Colts in well-worn leather that snugged the stranger's thighs, then lifted to the gray-eyed, dark features of a face which showed competence and character rarely to be discovered in an ordinary range drifter.

"The Sandersons—the freight folks—need help, all right," the old man finally said. "They need it bad. And they need *men!*" He added, as his questioner nodded his thanks and turned to move away: "By the way, what name goes with the roan, mister?"

"Morgan," said the stranger. "Wayne Morgan."

He left, but didn't go directly to the freight line office. He had lived on trail rations for a good many days and had a hollow in him that called for town-cooked food. Also, it was always well in a strange

community to look around first, to get a comprehensive idea of the place before trying his luck.

Blue Spruce was small for a county seat town, with a few straggling rows of houses that climbed the foothill slope toward the timber, and streets warped out of shape by occasional red outcroppings of lava. But the important freight-road crossing was here—the north-south trail skirting the front range, and the other road that came westward from the railroad and which, at this point—began the rapid climb into the mining country and the summer range of the cattle spreads.

So the town was an important one, dominated as it was by the big freight yard of the Sanderson line. There was a barn like red court-house, a blocky hotel, a couple of saloons, and the general complement of stores and houses. Spruce and juniper dotted the slope, leaving their pleasant scent in the thin mountain air and masking the rawness of the town a little, with their beauty.

Wayne Morgan found a lunchroom near the court-house and stepped inside for a quick meal. It was early for the supper trade and he was served quickly, meanwhile listening to the flow of talk among the few customers already lining the pine counter. They were discussing with considerable animation certain troubles that the Sandersons were having protecting their stages and shipments.

"I'm blamed if I'll risk my hide again in one of their coaches," he heard a man say, emphatically. "Not with the Masked Rider loose hereabouts. So far he and his gang haven't shot up the passengers but that don't mean it couldn't happen. And it'd be no picnic stranded in the hills with a dead driver and team!"

"Thing that puzzles me," another man remarked, "is that I always heard the Masked Rider was a lone-hand outlaw. Didn't know he ever operated with a gang."

"He's playin' for big stakes," the first speaker reminded. "Good money in some of those Syndicate pay-rolls and specie shipments."

"I think there's more to it than that. I got a theory it's the Sandersons he's after. Maybe, somewhere in the past, old Ward crossed trails with him and made an enemy. Maybe now the Masked Rider is out to break the old man. If that's it, he hasn't got much further to go from what I hear."

MORGAN listened without appearing to take any interest. But he was missing no word as his gaze strayed through the big glass window at his elbow.

Outside, the day was dying, and a golden haze lay upon the streets. He watched the sunlight gild the tower at the top of the court-house.

A rider came along the street, forking an old gray mule rigged with a patched saddle and a rope hackamore. Something aroused Morgan's interest in the man astride the mule. He was gaunt, roughly dressed, with untrimmed gray hair and a shaggy beard that reached well down over the front of his bib overalls. He had a wild sort of look, a furtiveness that seemed to indicate he didn't like this town and didn't trust anyone in it.

He was a sheepherder, likely, or some other hermitlike oldster down from the hills. Morgan watched him dismount at the hitch rail in front of a store, tie up and step onto the plank sidewalk. He moved with a peculiar stride, shoulders rounded, head shot forward and swinging from side to side as though searching for enemies in this hostile, crowded town.

A flight of outside steps angled up the side wall of the store, and the bearded man climbed them. Idly Wayne Morgan noted the sign painted on the second floor windows proclaimed that the rooms were the offices of one Caleb Gorham, attorney-at-law.

When Morgan finally emerged from the lunchroom, after finishing his meal, he saw the bearded man hurrying down the steps again. There was the flash of green, bills being shoved into the pocket of dirty overalls. Then reaching the hitchrack and jerking loose the knot in the rope, the scarecrow led his droop-headed mule a

block down street and tied up in front of a saloon.

Morgan felt a moment's curiosity about what the old man had been doing in a lawyer's office, and whether the lawyer, Caleb Gorham, had given him that wad of greenbacks. But it swiftly passed as he headed for the Sanderson freight yard.

Sunset color was tinting the sky when he turned in under the high, arched gate in the wagon yard fence. It was a bit later than he had figured, because the office was locked up and dark. He turned away, disappointed.

A short distance beyond, a big stagecoach was being inspected and readied for a run. Probably it would pull out in the morning. A man was greasing the journals; another was down underneath the coach, apparently checking on the running gear. A third stood to one side, bossing the job. He glanced up as Wayne Morgan walked over.

"Howdy," Morgan said, pleasantly. "I'm lookin' for somebody in charge."

The man stood scowling at him, with arms akimbo.

"I'm Mike Cottrell," he said in an unfriendly tone. "I'm the yard boss."

"A big fellow, this Cottrell, an inch or two above Wayne Morgan's own considerable height, and with massive shoulders and arms corded with heavy muscle. He was black-haired, his features not unhandsome in a craggy sort of way, but there was sullen brooding in his eyes and hostility and intolerance in the look he gave Morgan.

"What you want?" he asked curtly.

The corners of Morgan's mouth pinched in a little, but he held his temper. "I'm lookin' for a job."

"Yeah?" Black eyes raked him. Mike Cottrell didn't seem to find anything he liked in this stranger's appearance. His lips quirked. "Maybe you better keep lookin'."

"Maybe I better talk to Ward Sanderson," Morgan said, coldly, and started to turn away.

The black-haired giant's big hand caught his shoulder, jerked him back.

"You stay away from Sanderson!" he ordered angrily. "You hear me? The boss don't need any two-gun saddle tramp nosing around."

Morgan hit him. Cottrell's last words just seemed to trip the trigger of his leashed anger and his right arm lashed forward in a short, crisp arc. His knuckles contacted with the side of Cottrell's jaw, and the unexpectedness of the blow caught the big man off-guard and drove him around, pivoting, off-balance. The side of his head struck the big coach with an audible thud. He folded, slid down the big wheel and lay there, stunned and motionless.

WAYNE MORGAN shook his numbed hand, as he looked down at the man he had felled. He was mildly astonished at himself, but Cottrell had asked for it by his challenging attitude. Morgan looked at the other two men. One stood gaping at him and at the unconscious yard boss, his hands dripping with grease, and the other came scrambling out from underneath the coach. Neither of them made any move to take up the battle for Cottrell.

"I didn't want trouble," Morgan said shortly, "but that big fellow couldn't lay off goadin' me, and I lost my temper. What you got to say about it?"

The men exchanged looks.

"I'd say that if I was you," one of them declared flatly, I'd light out away from here before he comes out from under that wallop on the skull. Mike Cottrell is no man I'd want to tangle with."

Morgan glanced at the coach. "You getting ready for a run tomorrow mornin'?"

"Yeah. Up to Dutchman's Camp—a bad stretch of road, these days. It's somewhere along that road that masked hombre and his gang that have been raisin' such ructions hereabouts generally pick to strike the stage shipments."

"Where can I find Ward Sanderson?" asked Morgan. "Where does he live?"

"Big white house, just at the north edge of town. But I don't think you'll

find him there. I heard him say he was havin' supper in the hotel dining room tonight, with his daughter and Ben Hubbard, owner of the Block H Ranch. They'd likely be there now."

Wayne Morgan thanked him. He looked again at big Mike Cottrell, who was stirring a little in the dust.

"Throw some water on him," he advised. "I couldn't have hurt him much—not just with my fist!"

He turned away, heading through gathering darkness for the square frame building that was the town's hotel.

CHAPTER III

Ambush Try

THE hotel was brightly lighted, and through the windows of the dining room Morgan could see quite a few customers seated at the white-clothed tables. He did not, of course, know by sight the man he was looking for, but his problem was solved for him easily. For he was just starting up the broad steps to the hotel veranda when he heard someone say, "Good evenin', Mr. Sanderson," and he looked quickly to see who had been addressed.

He guessed at once that the elderly, erect figure just stepping out onto the gallery would be the stageline owner. With him were a tall, brown-haired girl, and a young fellow who looked to be a cattleman—the Block H boss, Hubbard, and Sanderson's daughter. A kerosene lamp burning in a wall bracket beside the door showed them clearly.

Wayne Morgan moved toward them, one hand rising to touch the brim of his hat as he spoke Ward Sanderson's name. The old man had just turned sharp blue eyes upon him when a gunshot crashed in the street.

The bullet passed so close to Morgan that he might have thought it had been aimed at him, except that it was Ward Sanderson's flat-topped hat that was ripped off by the slug and sent bouncing against the log wall of the hotel. Morgan saw the stunned look on the old man's face; he heard the girl's startled cry. Then, moving almost instinctively, his own right-hand gun was leaping into his fingers.

He whirled and with a single swipe of the barrel smashed the glass chimney of the wall lamp, which had the group targeted for that unseen gunman. And then, as darkness abruptly shrouded the veranda, he was taking a running leap, vaulting the railing and hitting the ground below.

Excited yells had broken out on the tail of the shot. Paying no heed to them, Morgan's whole attention was centered on the dark slot between two buildings on the opposite side of the street. There, he judged in lightning decision, the killer who had attempted to ambush Ward Sanderson had been in lying in wait for the old man and his party to appear in the hotel doorway. Apparently only a slight misjudging of the shot had prevented a killing.

As pistoning legs drove Morgan straight across the dust toward that narrow slot, he heard the ambusher pounding away at a run.

"Hold up, there!" he shouted, and without pausing lifted his gun and threw off a warning shot, aimed high.

His bullet drew answer. The ambush weapon flamed as the fugitive halted long enough in flight to trigger back at him. Morgan saw the muzzle flash, heard the report slap echoes among the buildings that crowded in the narrow alley, but the ambusher had shot without aiming and the bullet struck a gout of dirt somewhere at Morgan's right.

He kept going, recklessly, and not bothering to try another blind shot. At the end of the alley, the gate in a high wooden fence slapped shut. Reaching the barricade Morgan wasted no time hunting for the opening but hooked one hand over the top of it and vaulted over. He landed ankle-deep in the loam of somebody's vegetable garden and halted, searching the gathering shadows about him.

It was that deceptive tail-end of twilight when there is a bare trace of light remaining, diffused through the darkness of the dusk, and things seem to have definite shape until looked at directly, and then only to see their contours dissolve.

Wayne Morgan thought he glimpsed a running figure and then wasn't sure. He started forward, across the yard. The bulk of a house loomed up, with no lights showing. But in a neighboring house a window screeched open suddenly. "Who's down there?" a voice called sharply. "What's the shootin'?"

Somewhere a dog had began barking frantically.

Then Morgan had reached the street beyond, but there he held up, looking quickly about for sign of his quarry. He saw none, and heard no sound of running feet. The road stretched empty in the gray half-light. Across from where he stood, a clump of pines encroached upon the fringe of the town. Knowing it would be too risky trying to flush the ambusher out of there—if that was where he had taken refuge—Wayne Morgan had to give up. With a shrug he started to shove his gun into holster.

AT THAT moment, the *clip-clop* of hoofs across a stretch of hard lava pulled his head sharply to the right. A man was riding away up the street, heading toward where it debouched into the trail into the timber and the hills. Had he just now ridden out of the trees across the way?

BLUE HAWK

Morgan lifted his gun, held the move uncertainly. The distance was too great, the light too poor for a telling shot.

As he stood scowling after the dimly-seen rider, the fellow crossed the spill of lamp glow from a window briefly—just long enough to identify him. A gaunt, shabby figure, forking a slab-sided gray mule. Then he was gone. That strange, hermitlike figure could have been the man who had tried for Ward Sanderson's life. Or his riding past just then might only be coincidence.

Morgan went back to the hotel, ponder-

ing, and found plenty of excitement there as the aftermath to the shooting.

Glass shards from the smashed lamp crunching underfoot, he pushed his way through the crowd on the veranda. In the lobby, Ward Sanderson was seated in a leather chair with his daughter's hand upon his shoulder, comforting him. It was obvious that the startling and nearly-successful attack from the dark had unnerved the old man. He appeared shaken, his face white, his hands trembling slightly.

The rancher, young Ben Hubbard, stood by with a look of grim concern on his bronzed face. A fourth member had joined the group—a tall, thin figure in a rusty black cloth suit and black string tie, his thinning sandy hair brushed back from a high, domed forehead. He had a dry and yellowish skin, a nervous manner. A pair of spectacles rode the bridge of his thin beak of a nose.

As Wayne Morgan entered the lobby this man was saying petulantly.

"The sheriff ought to be here! We pay his salary with our taxes and when a thing like this happens—"

Then Ward Sanderson saw Morgan approaching.

"Here's the man who started after the bushwhacker!" he broke in. "You have any luck, young fellow?"

Morgan halted before the chair, looking down at the stageline owner.

"He got away. I never got a look at him." He had decided for the moment not to mention seeing the bearded hermit. He wanted first to learn something about that man. "You didn't get hurt, did you, Mr. Sanderson?"

"Oh, no." The old man laughed a little, shakily, and pushed to his feet with his daughter's hand under his arm to help him. "But a thing like that can unsettle a gent." He gave Morgan a sudden, sharp stare. "But you know my name! I don't think I've ever seen you before."

"I'm new hereabouts. I was trying to find you, though, to ask you for a job."

He felt all their eyes on him.

"A job?" old Sanderson repeated.

"If there's one open. I talked to a big fellow over at the yard but he kicked me out, so I came lookin' for you."

"Mike Cottrell did that, did he?" Sanderson frowned.

JUST as he spoke the name, the yard boss himself came bursting through the lobby doorway. Looking around he spotted his employer and hurried over. He was hatless, and breathing hard as though he had been running.

"Ward!" he blurted. "I thought you were— Someone told me you'd been shot!"

"Not quite," the old man said grimly. "The bullet only drilled my Stetson. Thanks to this young man's quick thinkin', there wasn't time for another try." He indicated Morgan.

Cottrell swung him a look, and recognized him. A slow flush crawled up through the pillarlike neck of the big fellow. It turned livid a mark on the side of his jaw, a mark that Morgan's knuckles had put there. Morgan returned his stare, face expressionless.

"Cottrell," demanded Sanderson, "did you turn this man down for a job?"

"Of course I did," said the yard boss. "We got all the barn men we need."

"That ain't the kind of a job I was lookin' for," Morgan said quietly. "I saw a coach makin' up for a run into the hills tomorrow mornin'. I'd like to ride it—on shotgun!"

He heard someone's sharp intake of breath.

"That—that might be a dangerous job, young man!" the old man almost stammered.

"I think I understand," said Morgan. "But I expect to earn my pay."

"Well," Sanderson observed thoughtfully, "anyone who'd have the nerve to charge a bushwhack gun, in a dark alley —"

"Would you actually sign on some drifter for an important chore like that?" cried Mike Cottrell. "Some two-gun ranny you've never even laid eyes on before, and whose name you don't even know?"

THEN Pat Sanderson was taking a hand, her pretty face clouded by a frown. "I don't understand what's come over you lately, Mike! You act so—suspicious of everyone. I see no reason not to hire this man if he wants to volunteer, especially when we need a shotgun guard so badly. What do you think, Ben?"

She appealed to the rancher who stood at her elbow.

"Why, I agree with you, Pat." Ben Hubbard said quickly. "Though of course it's none of my business."

"Damn right it's none of your business!" retorted Cottrell hotly. "But, go ahead—stick your beak in. Everybody's opinion counts but mine, around here. Maybe you ought to start lookin' for a new yard boss, Sanderson, while you're at it!"

"Now, wait a minute, Cottrell."

But the old stageline owner's words broke off, unfinished, because the big fellow had heeled abruptly and gone striding away, his wide-shouldered figure disappearing through the lobby doorway. Ward Sanderson shrugged irritably.

"Sometimes I get plumb mad about that temper of his!" But he dismissed the surly yard boss with a shrug. "Well, if you really want this job, Mr.—" He caught himself. "Come to think of it, Mike was right about one thing. I don't know your name!"

Morgan gave it to him, and Sanderson introduced his daughter, and the Block H owner, Ben Hubbard.

"And this is Caleb Gorham," he finally added.

The yellow-skinned man in the black clothing had listened in silence to most of the conversation. Now he offered Morgan a bony hand that felt as dry as parchment.

"As Ward Sanderson's friend," he said, smiling toothily, "I want to thank you for saving his life at the risk of your own. Except for your courage, this night's doings might have had a tragic ending!" Gorham looked about at the group. "In fact, if Miss Pat will spare us, I'd like to invite all of you up to my office for a drink to celebrate the fortunate way that things have turned out."

"Of course," said Pat, as her father hesitated. "I think it would do Dad good. He still looks a little upset. And I'll come along, too. If you don't mind, that is."

"Mind?" Caleb Gorham made her a courtly bow and said unctuously "You would make only too charming an addition to the party!"

CHAPTER IV

Blue Hawk Takes the Trail

IN THE second-floor law office of Caleb Gorham, Wayne Morgan found himself holding a glass that Gorham got for him out of a drawer of the shabby, rolltop desk while the yellow-skinned man broke the seal on a bottle of bonded whisky and poured drinks for his guests.

The lawyer took his own glass, lifted it in a toast to smiling Pat Sanderson. When the four men had emptied their glasses, Wayne Morgan decided to put the question that had been forming in his mind for minutes now.

"Mr. Gorham," he said casually, "I saw a gent come out of here this afternoon who looked like he might be an old coot I used to know once. A shabby old-timer with a gray bush of a beard. I remember he rode a mule."

"Oh, you must mean Hube Dekins."

"Dekins?" Morgan frowned. "That doesn't sound like the name. He been around this country long?"

"Why, I guess he's always been here. That right, Ward?"

Sanderson nodded. "Ever since I can remember," he confirmed, though I don't know him personally. He used to be a prospector during the days of the big strikes—found and gambled away two or three good-payin' properties, I've heard. After that he worked in the mines, that is, after the Syndicate bought them. Old Dekins hasn't been out of these hills in

close to twenty years, I'd imagine."

"Can't be the man I knew, then," Morgan said. "What does he do for a livin' nowadays?"

"He's practically on a pension from the Syndicate," the lawyer, Gorham, explained. "They've got a bunch of shut-down mines and he lives up there as a caretaker, looking after things. Once a month he comes down to Blue Spruce and makes his report and I pay him." He added, in explanation, "I'm retained by the Syndicate to represent them locally, and handle any business for them when it comes up."

"I understand." Morgan set his empty glass on the desk thoughtfully. "Probably livin' alone like that would be apt to turn the old fellow sort of—well, kind of loco, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, he's that, all right. You'd never guess what he did today. He gave me an envelope, sealed, and asked me to put it in my safe and leave it there, and open it only in case something happened to him. You'd have thought, to look in his eye, that a dozen enemies were camped on his trail, just waiting to kill him. Anyway I put the envelope away, as he asked me to." He jerked his head at the big iron safe in a corner of the room. "Of course, the old fellow is harmless—he couldn't hurt anybody, and I can't imagine any reason why anyone would want to harm him."

The conversation turned them to the freighting and stage-coach business, and the upshot was that Wayne Morgan signed on for the dangerous job of shotgun messenger for the beleaguered Sanderson Stage line. When that was satisfactorily concluded, after a few further minutes of desultory talk Morgan excused himself, saying that he had to hunt a place to stay. Tomorrow he would ride the coach to Dutchman's Camp, with a Syndicate payroll in the strong-box beneath the front boot.

But, leaving Gorham's office, he didn't go directly to the rooming house that had been recommended to him. Instead, after observing his back trail to make sure no one was watching, he struck out through the slanting streets and climbed to a place at the edge of the town where a single tall pine lifted its head like a signal post above a tangle of scrub timber and lava boulders.

Morgan placed his back to the tree and stood looking at the starry night, and at the lights of the town spread out before him. He had waited only a few minutes when a quiet voice at his elbow murmured:

"Senor?"

Wayne Morgan turned quickly, a little startled by the silent suddenness of the arrival, although long experience had taught him to expect such things.

"Well, Blue Hawk!" he said.

STARLIGHT dimly showed the figure that had melted out of the shadows to join him at the rendezvous beneath the tall pine. The man was like a shadow himself—a tall, well-formed Indian, with black shoulder-length hair tied with a bandeau, and clad in white shirt, drill trousers, and moccasins, with a sash about his middle.

"And what have you learned, Senor?" he asked, using the only name he ever employed in addressing his companion of the trails.

"Considerable," said Morgan. "But nothing to help us much as yet, Hawk. I've talked to Sanderson, and I'll be ridin' the stage tomorrow. Maybe nothin' will happen. On the other hand, it may be my chance to come to grips with this gent who's puttin' his crimes onto the head of the Masked Rider!"

"Then the stories we've heard are true?"

"They're true, all right! Folks in this town can talk of nothin' else. Plenty of witnesses have described the hombre—black mask, black cape, black horse. Complete down to every detail. He's doin' a thorough job of it."

"I think, then, we're going to have to do something about him!" Blue Hawk said grimly.

"We are, Blue Hawk!" Wayne Mor-

gan's tone was firm. "On two counts. It's nothin' new, of course, for outlaws to try to throw their own guilt onto the Masked Rider. It's happened before, and it will again. But in this case somebody apparently is out to ruin Ward Sanderson, for a reason I can't put my finger on as yet. I like Sanderson, from the little I've seen of him. He's a fair and honest man, and he's got a fine girl who's in love—if I can read sign at all—with a likable young rancher. All this trouble is hittin' 'em hard. So you see there's more than a personal account we have to square with our double!"

For although no man knew this save Blue Hawk, his Yaqui partner, Wayne Morgan was himself the man who had come to be known throughout the length and breadth of the West by the name of the Masked Rider. And these two alone—except for the killer who had adopted the mask and cape to disguise himself in his forays against the Sanderson line—knew that actually a usurper was blacking the name of the Masked Rider with his evil doings. Rumors of the marauder had brought Morgan and his Yaqui Indian partner to these hills, to find out just what lay behind the stories and, if they were true, to bring justice and exposure to the culprit.

As many grateful persons throughout the West could have testified, the true Masked Rider was no criminal, but a mysterious figure who gave himself without stint to the uprooting and destruction of evil, and the aiding of the injured and oppressed. He was a Robin Hood rider whose deadly matched guns spoke only in defense of the right wherever he found it challenged by the wickedness of men.

But circumstances, and the machinations of his enemies, had nevertheless succeeded in branding him an outlaw, with such enticing rewards on his head that the hand of almost every lawman wherever he went was ready to turn against him. It was only in his alter ego rôle of a drifting cowhand, Wayne Morgan, that he could safely show himself before his fellowmen.

"I've no idea as yet who could be wanting to break the Sandersons," Morgan repeated. "But it's pretty plain that somebody does. Not only that, but he tried to ambush Ward Sanderson tonight."

He told the Indian about the shooting, and of seeing the eccentric, Hube Dekins, suspiciously soon afterward.

"Hawk," he said, "I think it might be worth while if we knew somethin' more about this Dekins hombre. How about seein' what you can turn up?"

"Very well, Senor," said the Yaqui, in the meticulous English he had learned at a mission school.

It was Blue Hawk's rôle to stay in the background, ready to aid his friend in innumerable ways with his canny Indian skills and his steadfast, fearless courage.

"I'll take a little ride into the hills tonight," he said, "and see what I can learn."

When they parted, Wayne Morgan re-

[*Turn page*]

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turned to the center of town to get ready for his new job with the Sandersons.

Blue Hawk stood like a silent shadow under the big tree, watching until his trail partner had gone, and until his wary senses assured him that all was well and that their meeting here had gone unobserved. When he could catch no sight or sound of an eavesdropper, the Yaqui gave a grunt of satisfaction and, turning away, melted again into brushy darkness.

WITHIN the cover of the pines, a gray bronc waited at tether. Blue Hawk slipped quickly into saddle, headed his mount away from the lights of the town and toward the taller timber and the trail into the hills.

He had no difficulty, even by starlight, in finding the tracks of Hube Dekins' mule. Dekins had kept strictly to the wagon road, apparently not expecting pursuit, and making no effort to cover his backtrail. Blue Hawk pressed on after him, through the silent darkness where the ghostly shapes of the trees lifted black against shouldering hills.

The trail climbed steadily. The gray, the Indian's favorite mount, a deep-barreled animal with both speed and endurance, held a steady pace. At intervals the Yaqui would halt to give the horse a rest, taking the moment to slip from saddle and, kneeling, examine the dusty trace with the sure touch of questing fingers that read the prints of the mule with the same certainty that a blind man reads Braille.

Without difficulty he found the side trail that branched off from the stage road to Dutchman's Camp. Some time later he stood beside his gray pony in the shelter of a timbered ravine, looking out upon a cleared slope and the buildings and slag heaps of a closed-down gold mine.

It was too early for a moon. Starlight softened the ugliness that men had created here amid the beauty of the virgin hills. It showed, however, the square shapes of the deserted buildings, the long reduction shed sprawling down the steep slope, the boarded-up mouth of the main tunnel opening further up. A single pin-point of candlelight showed behind the dusty window of one of the shacks, and sparks streamed from a stove-pipe chimney. But there was no sign of Hube Dekins.

Silently Blue Hawk drifted forward, leaving the gray within the concealment of the trees. On soundless moccasins he moved across the open without disturbing any of the loose and rattling stones that littered it, and came up against the side of the shack. A glance through the window showed him its crude interior—a table and battered chair, a box bunk against one wall, shelves containing foodstuffs and other odds and ends, the roaring metal stove. But the caretaker was not in the room.

Blue Hawk drew back from the window and, rounding a corner of the shed, put his keen glance across the layout of the mine. Directly above him sprawled the long, low bulk of the reduction shed. He left the shack and sped quickly into the lea of its rough wall, pressed against it while he looked about, hunting for the eccentric caretaker he knew must be somewhere about the shutdown workings.

Cowhide boots crunched loudly on broken stone, and Blue Hawk spotted him. He guessed that Hube Dekins had been tending to his mule, which he must have staked out in some grass near the mine. Now he was returning to his shack, probably eager for the warmth of the stove, for the night was chill in this high country and at this season.

Then suddenly, and completely without warning, Hube Dekins whirled in his tracks, dropping into a crouch. A flash of gunflame appeared at his middle as the sharp voice of the six-shooter smashed the stillness. A bullet slapped into the wall of the reduction shed, only a yard from where Blue Hawk stood with his back against its rough timbers.

"Who's there?" shouted Dekins, in a high-pitched and frantic voice. The cry mingled with the echoes of the shot that went rolling off into the surrounding hills. "Answer me quick or I'll plug you!"

CHAPTER V

Raid!

BLUE HAWK froze, one hand clamped upon the butt of the six-gun that was thrust into the sash about his waist.

Astonishment filled him. He had made no sound, and he was sure he could not be seen in the deep shadow against the shed wall. Yet with some uncanny sense that perhaps was bred of his years of solitude in the empty hills, the caretaker had grown aware of a lurker's presence, and had almost found the Yaqui with that shot.

Unmoving, Blue Hawk waited. In the starlight, Hube Dekins waited, too, still at a crouch, still no doubt with that gun leveled and his finger trembling on the trigger. But no second shot came, despite the man's unanswered challenge. He must have decided he had been mistaken.

Slowly he straightened. Finally, after another wait, he turned away and continued on his way to the shack which was his home. The door opened, letting faint candlelight shaft out into the darkness. Then it closed again. And at once the Yaqui recrossed the open space and crept again to peer through the dusty pane.

Inside, Hube Dekins was pottering around, getting together a meal. Once he paused in his work to take down a box from a shelf in the corner, to open it and fumble with its contents, apparently intently engrossed, with whatever it contained. But all at once he slapped the lid shut, and his hawkish, bearded head jerked as he darted a quick glance around, into the corners of the room, across his hunched shoulder at the fly-blown window.

That same uneasiness, that haunted feeling of being watched, seemed to be prodding him, with the unseen eyes of Blue Hawk resting upon him outside the window.

He returned the box to its shelf and sat down to eat. His meal quickly bolted, he hitched his chair closer to the flickering candle and settled down to begin poring through the pages of a mail order catalogue. And Blue Hawk, deciding he would learn nothing more of interest here, silently took his departure.

But as he returned to the gray and started for his own camp, the Yaqui was pondering what Wayne Morgan had told him the lawyer, Caleb Gorham, as saying about that bearded man in the shack: "The old fellow is harmless—he couldn't hurt anybody."

"Harmless!" muttered Blue Hawk, and shook his head.

He would not soon forget that sudden whirling crouch, that unexpected lashing of gunflame at an unseen, unheard target. Hube Dekin, he judged, was as thoroughly dangerous a man as he had ever encountered . . . .

Blue Hawk was in the hideout camp he had found for the Masked Rider, himself, and their extra saddle stock the next day when, in the town of Blue Spruce, precisely on the stroke of noon the coach for Dutchman's Camp rolled away from the station. Wayne Morgan was on the box beside the driver, three passengers were inside, and the Syndicate payroll was stowed away in the boot. Across his lap Morgan carried a twin-tubed, brightly polished Greener shotgun, both barrels loaded, and extra shells for the weapon were in his pocket. About his lean waist, of course, rode the twin holsters and black-handled guns.

Bill Hawkins, who was again handling the reins, had given the new guard a careful survey and had nodded shortly, seeming to like what he saw.

"If you're handy with all that artillery, feller," he said grudgingly, "maybe we got a chance of gettin' through. This masked jigger still ain't give me any trouble, but I figure this is goin' to be the day. I'm way overdue—and there's that money box we're settin' atop of!"

Four passengers had been scheduled for the run but at the last minute one had backed out and the rest had come close to following his example. Morgan knew

that things had indeed reached a crucial point. One more attack on a Sanderson stage and passengers would begin refusing to ride them. The insurance companies would also likely withdraw their coverage of the pay-roll and specie shipments. If that happened, the future of the line stood in considerable doubt.

PAT SANDERSON watched from the freight yard entrance as the stage rocked past, heading for the trail. In her face was a cloud of worry, and Morgan could guess the thoughts that troubled her. Some of the yard hands stood about watching the stage pull out, but big Mike Cottrell's towering shape was not among them.

Pat had hold Wayne Morgan that the yard boss had ridden out that morning, heading eastward to the railroad to see about a carload of freight which had somehow missed its destination. He also meant to buy grain for the stock barn. He hoped to be back tomorrow.

Morgan found himself wondering if Cottrell hadn't perhaps had too much of the company work shoved off onto his broad shoulders. With old Ward Sanderson close to cracking under the strain of recent developments that was understandable, though certainly Pat was doing her share of the office chores, and more. However, if Cottrell found it necessary to be spending more and more of his time in saddle, running around attending to various details of the business that were normally outside his jurisdiction, it seemed plain that his own regular work was bound to suffer.

The coach ran smoothly through the midday sunlight, behind six matched horses that worked as one under the expert handling of Bill Hawkins' hands upon the ribbons. Hawkins didn't talk much to his new shotgun messenger. They rode in silence except for the rumble of the stage, the rhythmic pound of hoofs, the music of trace chains.

Before long, they were in the hills, the silent ranks of the tall timber crowding in upon the narrow stage trace, and the high granite peaks sparkling in a cloudless mountain sky.

Morgan rode easily, his tall body absorbing the lurch and roll of the swaying coach, but he was constantly alert now. Bill Hawkins had broken a long silence to observe laconically, "We're gettin' into their territory!"

As he studied the land through narrowed eyes, Morgan could see that this was an ideal stretch of country for outlaws who aimed to strike and flee without leaving any trace of their going. It was a land of volcanic rock, with tumbled outpourings of hardened lava, black and ugly-looking, interspersing the thick forest mantling. No wonder the sheriff's posses had had little luck in tracing the masked raider and his crew across such terrain.

The way dipped steeply down at one point where a wash-out had taken the bottom out of the road. Hawkins had to lean on the brake and let the horses take an easy course or the coach would be apt to tip. Looking ahead, where the road slanted up again toward a rocky rise crested by timber, Wayne Morgan found himself thinking with the sudden compelling warning of instinct:

"This will be it!"

There had been no stir of activity in those trees, but it was such a natural spot to make a play upon the slowed stage that he went quickly tense with expectancy. The right-hand Colt slipped into his fingers from its holster.

Then, as they cleared the bottom of the drop and Bill Hawkins stood to whoop at the horses and urge them into the collars with popping of his long whip, to take the climb of the opposite side of the wash-out, a rifle cracked sharply. At the same instant Wayne Morgan saw the man who had fired the shot, saw him framed between two pine trunks, above and to the right of the trail.

The rifleman was erect in the stirrups of a big black stallion, weapon lifted to his shoulder, with smoke feathering from its barrel. He was dressed in black. A black mask covered the upper half of his face, beneath a wide-brimmed black

Stetson. And the breeze that stirred upon the hill pulled at the wide black cape hanging from his shoulders.

Beside Morgan. Bill Hawkin's voice croaked hoarsely:

"The Masked Rider!"

Face to face at last with the impostor, Wayne Morgan's jaw bunched tight and a grim, icy light glinted in his slitted blue eyes. And the gun in his fists was bucking even before the snapping report of the rifle ceased echoing among the rocky heights.

Firing uphill, his first bullet was a trifle short and dirt geysered at the feet of the black-clad horseman. Morgan raised his sights, once more crimped the trigger.

LUCK was against him. Because in the brief instant before his hammer could drop, another gun roared somewhere, and as if emphasizing the report the off wheel horse squealed and dropped in the traces.

The coach rocked to the jarring of the animal's death lunge, and Wayne Morgan was thrown completely off-balance. When he could grab the iron seat rail to steady himself, and looked again for his target, the two pine trunks framed only empty space. The false Masked Rider had pulled back to safety.

A grunt of chagrin broke from Morgan, but there were plenty of other things for him to worry about. From half a dozen points in the timber a regular fusillade of lead was being hurled at the stalled coach now. Bill Hawkins was cursing and fighting his screaming, frightened horses. And to get solid ground under him so that he could shoot back at the attackers, Wayne Morgan dropped down the side of the coach, put his back to the big forward wheel. With legs braced he began triggering back, a gun in each hand.

The raiders were still keeping to the trees, just visible as they shifted about, firing from the protection of the tree trunks. Each time Morgan saw enough of one of them to target he snapped a slug. With his second bullet a man screamed in agony, lurched full into sight and went down in a twisting sprawl before he began to crawl slowly back into the timber.

That was one knocked out of the fight. And while bullets scored the body of the weather-beaten coach behind him, Morgan turned and hurled an angry challenge at the passengers huddled inside it.

"Haven't any of you got a gun—and the nerve to use it?"

Up on the box, Bill Hawkins had given up trying to quiet his horses and had seized the shotgun Morgan had laid aside in favor of his two trusty belt revolvers. The boom of it lashed out above the rattle of gunfire as he dropped the hammer on one of its barrels. A charge of buckshot tore into the trees, spraying the trunks and branches.

Then Wayne Morgan decided it was time to take the initiative. To keep pressing hard was the only way for a man to hold his own in this kind of a battle—push the enemy, give him no time to recover from whatever losses that were inflicted on him.

At a crouch, carrying his smoking guns, he started running—straight up the hill, straight into the face of the outlaw guns. Lead stamped the earth in front of him, screamed overhead. An iron tooth of pain bit at his shoulder as one of the hastily thrown bullets almost tallied.

CHAPTER VI

A Manhunt Misses Fire

PASSENGERS back in the coach had finally started working guns and Bill Hawkins had unshipped a hogleg of his own, to cover Morgan with a strong barrage. That kept the raiders pinned for a moment behind the protection of the trees.

Then Morgan had gained his objective—an outcrop of black lava, a shallow shield but enough to give him cover and yet put him within yards of the enemy. He threw himself behind it, diving to the ground

with both guns flung ahead of him, barrels laid across the top of the lava slab. And they began to buck and flame at targets he could now see clearly.

He dropped another raider, sent him scrambling away on hands and knees with one skewered leg dragging. And suddenly the audacity of his counter-attack, coupled with the unexpected resistance that surprisingly had built up among the passengers of the stalled coach decided the issue. The remaining attackers began to withdraw. A last shot or two came, a last bullet struck Morgan's lava shield and went screaming off into the blue.

After that, only the sounds of a hurried retreat of hoofbeats drumming until they faded to silence. A stillness then that was a blessing after the ear-punishing racket of the guns, descended upon the scene.

WAYNE MORGAN twisted about for a look at the coach. The passengers were piling out, carrying their smoking guns and jabbering with excitement. Bill Hawkins leaped down from his perch, took a look at the dead wheel horse, then came running to where Morgan stood calmly reloading his guns.

"Son of a gun!" whooped Bill Hawkins. "We done it! We broke the jinx! We sent that danged masked hellion and his crew packing—and the pay-roll still in the boot!" He stopped short, and amended, "I reckon' I mean *you* done it, mister! Any other man I ever knew would of quit cold against them odds. But you stood up to 'em, and give the rest of us the nerve to back your play and hold 'em off!"

Morgan shrugged aside the praise. "They thought it would be easy. Show 'em a fight and they were bound to get rattled and start shootin' wild." He shoved his reloaded guns into their holsters, stooped to pick up the hat that had fallen from his head.

"You're shot!" the driver said.

Morgan flexed his shoulder. "I'll have it looked at when we get to Dutchman's Camp. Right now, let's see what we can do about gettin' that coach rollin' again, before they can maybe reorganize and come back for a second whack at us!"

Dutchman's Camp was a place of muddy streets and makeshift houses, clinging precariously to the walls of a gulch scarred by all the ugliness that men can create when they tear gold from the body of the earth.

A brawling stream of dirty yellow water poured through the bottom of the gulch. It whipped at the wheels of the big coach as Bill Hawkins crippled in behind a five-horse team, and hauled up before the log station on the far bank.

Within minutes after the arrival of the stage, the entire camp was stirring with excitement. Wayne Morgan had no need to brag about the way he had foiled the masked man and his raiders. Bill Hawkins and the passengers took care of that for him. Quickly Morgan found himself the center of admiring attention, of men who wanted to shake his hand and clap him on the shoulder.

This camp lived on the Syndicate pay-rolls and the strong-box that Bill Hawkins handed down from the boot of the stage was the first which had been brought through in nearly a month. It was no wonder the men of the town hailed the one who had been responsible for bringing it past the masked bandit's crew.

There was no doctor here but the station agent did some crude frontier surgery on Morgan's hurt shoulder. He pronounced it a mere bullet streak that needed no more tending than a dousing in raw whisky and a rag tied over the wound to keep it clean. While it was being worked on, Morgan suddenly found himself confronted by Sheriff Joe Wake.

The lawman had happened to be in camp and someone had run to look him up, finding him in the middle of a siesta—worn out, he claimed, from beating the hills in futile search of the mysterious robed rider. On learning the news he came hurrying and began hurling questions at Wayne Morgan, his jaw busy with a generous wad of chewing tobacco.

"I want every man who can find a bronc to hit saddle and come with me!" he said then. "You, too, Morgan! Show me where

those hellions hit the stage and this time, by glory, we'll trail 'em to their holes!"

MORGAN heard this with small enthusiasm. From all reports, and from his own estimate of the sheriff at this first meeting, he had no confidence at all in Joe Wake's ability as a manhunter. To ride with him promised to be a waste of time, but he wasn't given any choice. So he pulled on a shirt which someone gave him to replace the one that had been ruined by his shoulder hurt, and went out to promote a horse and saddle and join the rapidly forming posse.

From the station corral he roped out a tough-jawed roan mustang and got a borrowed saddle strapped on it, favoring his wounded shoulder as he worked because it felt as though it might be turning stiff. Mounted, he fell in with the eight or nine mounted men who had grouped around the sheriff in the muddy street. They were about to pull out when a new arrival approached the group.

Morgan saw the flash of the westering sun reflected from thick-lensed eyeglasses before he recognized the man. Then he saw that it was Caleb Gorham who was kicking his livery stable bronc hard, up the trail from the yellow creek fording. A look of alarm was on the lawyer's dry, beak-nosed features.

"Has it happened again?" he demanded hoarsely as he rode up and spotted the sheriff. "There's a dead horse back yonder beside the trace."

"It almost happened," Joe Wake answered him, "but not quite. This time your company is in luck, Gorham—thanks to this new shotgun guard of the Sandersons'. The raiders hit the stage but they didn't get the strong-box. We're out to take the trail while it's still fresh."

Caleb Gorham favored Morgan with a quick stare. "This is good news!" he exclaimed. "And while I'm no manhunter I wish you'd wait long enough for me to get a fresh horse and join you."

[*Turn page*]

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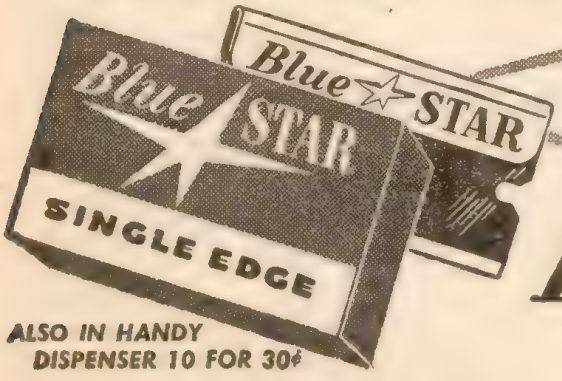

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"Sure," grunted the sheriff. "Every man counts. But hurry it! Each minute we sit here those varmints are drawin' farther away from us."

They took the murky crossing at a good clip, rolled out on the forest road with a rhythmic drum of shoe irons that battered echoes from the close ranging wall of pine and spruce. A high impatience rode Wayne Morgan. He wanted to be away, riding on his own, without this crowd to hamper his movements. Instead, Sheriff Wake was apparently bent on keeping him close to his elbow—partly at least, Morgan felt, for the protection of the shotgun guard's guns in case by some unexpected chance they should actually run into the outlaws they were seeking.

When they came to the sopt where the unsuccessful attack had been launched at the stage, the sheriff insisted on a new recital of every detail of the fighting. While the posse milled around, staring at the body of the horse that had had to be cut out of harness and left beside the road, Joe Wake dismounted and, with Morgan, went over every foot of the battleground, demanding to know the position of each of the attackers. He paced out distances, more likely than not succeeding only in trampling out any sign that might have been left.

There was not much to see. A few empty shell cases glinted among the carpet of needles under that fringe of trees that crested the slope where the attackers had fought. There were no spots of blood to indicate where their wounded had fallen. Morgan said he thought three of the crew had taken bullets—how seriously they had been hit he didn't venture to suggest. If any were dead, the others had carried off their bodies in taking flight.

"Probably didn't want us seein' their faces," the sheriff decided judiciously. "Did you get a look at any of 'em durin' the fightin', Morgan?"

"I think they all were masked—neck cloths drawn up under their eyes. The leader was dressed in black, and wore a cloth mask with eye-holes cut in it."

"And a cape?"

"Yes."

The sheriff cursed fluently. "That sneakin' killer! This time he's gone too far. This time he won't have it so easy shaking us off his trail. Look—here's where they held the horses. And yonder they dropped off the ridge, making their getaway!" He whirled, started running back to where his posse waited. "Mount up!" he shouted breathlessly. "We're on our way!"

AS THEY piled into saddle, with the excitement of the manhunt suddenly fanned to flame by the sheriff's enthusiasm, a high, trembling cry broke across the other sounds, shrilling through the stillness of the timber.

Morgan, with stirrup twisted to receive his boot, jerked up his head to listen. The other men were pausing to turn and look about for the source of the scream.

"A mountain lion, somewhere in the timber!" one of them yelled.

Another, half sliding a carbine from its saddle scabbard beneath his knee, muttered: "How I'd like to notch my sights on that cat!"

"Forget it!" rapped Joe Wake, lifting the reins. "We're gunnin' for bigger game. Let's ride!"

A secret smile tipped the corners of Morgan's lips as he lifted easily into leather. He felt better after hearing that signal. For it had told him that Blue Hawk was nearby, and on the job. And though he had little faith in the blundering sheriff and his makeshift posse, he knew that if there was any trail to be found in this tough, rock-ribbed country the Yaqui's keen, native sense would find it.

So far as the crowd from Dutchman's Camp was concerned, at least, his predictions soon were proved to be correct. With a trail to follow they went pouring along it, pressing hard on the heels of the sheriff's mount as he led the way down off the ridge and into a tangled course of ravines and manzanita-clad slopes.

Morgan tried to advise caution, but Joe

Wake shrugged that aside with a suggestion of his own.

"It's plain enough by now they're headed for High Pass," he grunted. "If we don't keep pushin' they'll get across into those lava fields and we'll never stand a chance of catchin' up with 'em!"

Seeing then that the sheriff was not a man to take any one else's counsel, Wayne Morgan kept his mouth shut. But he was not in the least surprised when Joe Wake suddenly pulled in, signaling for a halt, and sat his restive bronc scowling at the ground.

"Now what the hell?"

The tracks they had been following were gone, completely vanished. Yet they were crossing a stretch of boggy ground caused by a seep spring's overflow, and if they were still on the trail there should have been plenty of sign of it. The possemen looked at the sheriff, and Joe Wake's thick neck began to color with anger and embarrassment.

"Cuss it!" he grunted. "We got off somewhere. Nothin' to do but backtrack till we find the place."

But that proved impossible. In overriding the spoor, the hoofs of the posse had so completely masked and stamped out all original sign that it was beyond recovering. A half-hour was spent milling and searching, without any result, before the sheriff had to admit defeat.

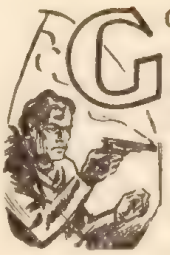
Morgan wisely downed the impulse to say, "I told you so." Instead he asked, mildly, "Well, you still think they were headed for the pass?" There was a controlled sarcasm in his voice.

Disgruntled, the lawman shook his head. "Reckon not," he growled, heavily. "They must have a hideout somewheres on this side of the peaks, but it'd be the devil to try and locate it, ridin' blind. Looks like we draw another blank—and just when we had reason to think, too, that this time things were going to be different!"

"What do we do, then?" Caleb Gorham demanded. "It isn't many hours to sunset. I don't see any point wasting our time beating these hills for nothing."

CHAPTER VII

The Spy



GORHAM waited for an answer, but the sheriff did not speak for a time. He stood in stirrups and ran a bleak look about, at the trees, the scabby outcroppings of lava, the shouldering ridges and snow peaks that glistened in the late sunlight.

"I ain't givin' up yet," he declared stubbornly. "I just remembered that the Block H has a crew combin' the high breaks around Telescope Peak for strays. There's a chance they might have seen or heard somethin'."

"These snakes ain't apt to have headed toward Telescope, are they?" someone said dubiously.

"Maybe not," the lawman grunted. "But it could be. Let's ride!"

They struck off in a new direction, climbing now. They got into stunted and scattered growth, where the late sun stretched lengthening shadows beyond each twisted pine and cedar. The odd formation of Telescope Peak stood above them, battering back the sound of the horses.

Presently they broke out of the timber and a high, V-shaped meadow opened before them. Yellow aspen stood about, and on the level banks of a cold stream were the scattered saddle packs of a cow camp. Horses grazed at picket; a cook fire ran its pencil stroke of blue smoke toward the sky.

Three members of the Block H crew had just ridden into camp and were standing about the fire with the cook, drinking coffee out of tin cups, their saddle mounts waiting on trailing reins. They turned quickly as the posse came jingling across the meadow. Big Ben Hubbard was one of the trio.

"Hey, Sheriff!" he sang out. "What's up?"

While the posse milled restlessly, Joe Wake leaned from saddle and talked brief-

ly with the young rancher. Hubbard listened, his face sober, but he could only shake his head in answer.

"I don't think there's been any strange riders in this section, Joe," he said. "I've been up here since sunrise myself, and the boys were in camp all night. We've covered a lot of country and I'm sure we'd have spotted 'em if those outlaws had been anywhere in the neighborhood." He added, "But I'll go out and check with the rest of the crew to make sure, if you want me to."

"Naw, it's all right," the sheriff growled, shaking his head. "I didn't hardly expect to learn any different." His glance moved to the blackened graniteware pot sitting in the coals of the fire. "Got any extra coffee there? This work kind of empties a man's stomach."

"Sure—sure!" Hubbard said and quickly invited, "Light down, gents!"

Wearily the posse members hitched themselves out of leather while the cook, an old puncher with a flour sack tied about his middle for an apron, started rounding up all the tin cups in camp. There weren't enough to go around and the men had to take their turns at the hot black brew.

Wayne Morgan carried his own drink over to where the sheriff, Lawyer Gorham, and the Block H boss were in somber discussion. Ben Hubbard gave him a friendly nod.

"Joe's been telling me just what you did down there on the stage trail this afternoon," he said. "It's the first good news I've heard in weeks. Looks to me as though Ward Sanderson has finally got hold of the man he needs."

Morgan was a little embarrassed by this praise but Sheriff Wake relieved him of having to reply to it. The lawman had been scowling at the steaming coffee in his cup and he said now:

"You know, there's angles to this business that have got me wonderin'. I heard some rumors today down at Dutchman's Camp, talk about the Syndicate maybe aimin' to reopen some of those closed-down, old mines. Gorham, I wonder if you know anything about that?"

The lawyer hesitated before he made reluctant answer. "I guess I'm not revealin' company secrets," he decided finally. "Yes, the rumors seem to be true. I was informed recently from headquarters that newer and cheaper scientific methods have been developed which make it seem likely the Golden Lady and some of the other properties could be put into production again. I'm expecting within a week or so to see a couple of mining engineers out from the East to look the old shafts over and make a final recommendation. Up to now, of course, the whole thing has been pretty well hushed up."

"But suppose," the sheriff suggested, "somebody had got wind of the thing. Suppose they realized that, with the mines back in operation, there'd be a whale of a boom in the freightin' business in these hills. Could that be the reason for all the warrin' against the Sandersons that seems to be aimed at drivin' 'em off the trails?"

THE question drew looks of thoughtful consideration from the others. Wayne Morgan looked at the sheriff with a new interest. He had put the man down as a windbag and an incompetent, but this suggestion of his had a lot to it that was worth pondering.

"Still, would the Masked Rider be involved in a program like that?" Caleb Gorham said dubiously. "He's the kind who strikes, and moves on."

"True enough," the sheriff admitted. "But he might have a workin' arrangement with somebody—him and his gang keep their loot, the tipoff man to take over when Sanderson has gone broke."

"And who would that be?" Ben Hubbard prompted.

Joe Wake shrugged, and tossed the dregs of his coffee to hiss and sputter in the fire.

"I'm just supposin'. But I always have said this thing had the earmarks of bein' the work of some enemy, maybe, inside the Sanderson organization. That's as much as I've got to say, here and now."

Morgan had finished his own coffee. He leaned to toss the cup into the wreck pan.

"Well, Sheriff," he said then, "it don't look as though we're goin' to get anywhere today with this trail we've tried to foller. If you can spare me now I think I ought to be gettin' back to report to my boss. The Sandersons haven't heard yet, you know, about today's happenin's."

The sheriff scowled at him, as though reluctant to agree.

"I ain't give up yet," he began. "While there's light to see, I'm stickin' to this job."

"Let him go," Ben Hubbard put in quickly. "I'll throw saddle on a fresh bronc and ride with you, Sheriff, and bring some of my crew, if you think we can be of any help. I think this feller's done enough for one day, especially with that hurt arm and the blood he must have lost."

To this argument, the sheriff gave in. Promptly then Morgan was in saddle and riding away from that camp in the aspen meadow, leaving the posse still grouped about the fire.

The Block H boss had been right. That shoulder hurt was by no means a serious wound but after the long hours in saddle it had taken its toll. Wayne Morgan felt a dragging weakness which the strong coffee had somewhat alleviated. He knew, however, that he was far from finished with this day's work. His impatience, more than his shallow bullet wound, was draining him.

For too many hours he had been held by the sheriff's orders and by Joe Wake's futile effort at trailing the stage attackers, when with every moment the real trail had grown colder. He had chafed at the wasted time, and wondered how Blue Hawk was faring. It was with a sense of relief that he put the posse behind him and rode away into the timber, his own boss again.

He rode through the trees, and across a barren granite hump. At the top of it he turned for just a moment to glance behind him, down toward the clearing and the pencil-line of smoke from the Block H fire. A jay scolded in the head of a tall spruce near the edge of the meadow. Its raucous cries knifed across the stillness, and Morgan could see the flash of its plumage as it rose and settled among the branches, seemingly much perturbed.

That jay caused him to pull in and give the scene a closer, frowning scrutiny. And then, on a sudden impulse, Wayne Morgan was turning back and putting his bronc down again into the shadow of the trees.

The litter of needles soaked up the sound of the horse, but after a few minutes he halted and slipped from leather, anchored the reins to a branch and moved on afoot. He was close to the edge of the meadow when the near thud of a hoof jerked his glance quickly to one side.

Almost hidden in the heavy shadow of the trees, a bronc pawed the earth and eyed the intruder with uneasiness. In the next breath, Morgan saw what it was that had the bluejay worked up.

A MAN was crouched behind a wild rose bush, peering past it into the meadow—spying. He had removed his hat and it lay on the ground beside him. The shape of the fellow's head, the broad set of his heavy shoulders, identified the watcher for Morgan.

One hand curling about the butt of a holstered gun, Wayne Morgan said quietly:

"See somethin' interestin', Cottrell?"

He saw the hunched shoulders jerk and freeze at the unexpected challenge. Then, slowly, big Mike Cottrell straightened and turned to face him. For a moment neither spoke. Ward Sanderson's yard boss stood there with fists clenched, his chest lifting under cramped breaths, his face suffused with anger. The face still bore the mark of Wayne Morgan's fist.

"So it's you!" said Cottrell.

Morgan studied the big man, considering the puzzle of the yard boss' presence in this remote section of the hills, and the sinister import of his spying upon the Block H camp and Sheriff Wake's posse.

"I thought you were supposed to be on a trip to the county seat, feller," he said quietly. "You've gone a good hundred miles out of your way to get there. Ward Sanderson might be interested to know

about this trip of yours."

"Damn you!" broke from the man's tight lips. "Morgan, or whoever you are, don't mix into this any deeper than you have! And don't get in my way, because I'm not in any mood to mess with you."

"Do you figure to do any explainin'? You got any excuse for bein' found here like this?"

"To you," gritted Mike Cottrell, "I explain nothin'!"

Morgan slid the gun from holster. "Then how about the sheriff yonder? How about turnin' around and walkin' ahead of me through the trees and straight over to that fire?"

He didn't even see the blow start. It seemed incredible that anybody would challenge a naked gun, but Mike Cottrell was not a man of ordinary nerve. Too late Morgan jerked aside, swinging the weapon up. Then a wallop like that of a blacksmith's maul crashed against the side of his head and he went to his knees. The six-gun was sent spinning from his fingers.

CHAPTER VIII

Robin Hood Rider

MORGAN came bouncing back from the ground with the drive of a steel spring released, fully expecting the big man to rush him before he could reach his feet. But, surprisingly enough, Mike Cottrell held back until the last minute. Then he closed in, heavy fists swinging. Morgan met him with a chopping right that had the weight of his shoulder behind it, and that stopped Mike as it slammed into his broad chest. But for a moment only.

Neither man seemed to recall, just then, that both still had weapons strapped to their hips. The fists of both had tallied, and that meant that this would have to be settled with fists and not with lead. Big Mike Cottrell plainly had not forgotten that blow on the jaw that had laid him out the night before, in the Sanderson freight yard, and Wayne Morgan was in a mood to give him satisfaction in spite of the advantage that lay with Cottrell now.

He blocked a slicing right, wasn't able to check the left that followed it, and was driven back a step, almost stumbling. Cottrell had an inch or more on Morgan in height, and he had the bulk of brawny muscle that put extra pounds of weight behind his blows. And the fight had lasted only a matter of minutes before Wayne Morgan began to feel the weakness of his bullet-streaked shoulder, and of the long punishing hours in saddle.

Jaw set hard, he stood up to the unequal battle.

They fought in silence except for the slog of fists striking flesh, the grunt of panting, straining lungs. Morgan drew blood with a hard, glancing smash against the big man's cheek. But the outcome of this fight couldn't remain long in doubt. Despite his gameness, Wayne Morgan couldn't combat a heavier opponent and his own weakness at the same time. A treacherous black fog seemed to be settling within his brain, blinding him and dulling his thought processes.

When the finishing blow came, he saw it start but his limbs wouldn't obey him quickly enough to block or avoid it. The clublike fist struck squarely, and he went down.

He lay on his back in the pine needles, fully conscious, but numbed beyond movement, and waited to feel the smash of heavy cowhide boots. Oddly enough, that never came. Through the black haze of pain, he could see Mike Cottrell above him, staring down at the man he had felled, could even hear the rasping of the man's panting breath, harsh against the stillness of the shadowed trees.

Then the big fellow was kneeling and Morgan felt his hands pawing at him, unbuttoning his shirt, pulling it back to expose the crude bandage covering the shoulder wound. Blood had soaked through it, to stain the cloth of the shirt. A grunted exclamation broke from Ward Sanderson's yard boss:

"So the hombre *was* hurt, and fought

in spite of it!" Morgan heard him mutter.

A moment of silence. Even the jay had left by this time, taking its raucous, scolding voice away into the deep timber. Finally Mike Cottrell hoisted to his feet and walked away from Morgan. There came the creak of saddle leather, the thud of hoofs. These quickly died as Mike Cottrell rode away from the scene of the fight, leaving his beaten opponent sprawled on the earth.

Morgan took his time about rising, waiting to let the strength return fully into his numbed, tired body and to let his head clear. At length he pushed up to a sitting position, and felt gingerly of his jaw that gave the impression it might have been unhinged by that last brutal wallop.

Still, he had to admit, Cottrell had fought fair—scrupulously so. In a rough-and-tumble it was the victor's right to give his beaten adversary the boot—and Mike Cottrell had held off from this. Morgan couldn't refuse the surly yard boss a grudging respect.

Thoroughly rested now, he got to his feet and picked his six-shooter off the ground where Cottrell's first blow had sent it spinning, shoved it into leather. A glance through the brush screen masking the meadow beyond the trees showed that the sheriff's men had already ridden away from the Block H fire. Only the cook was left there, at work with his pots and pans.

Morgan turned away and, moving through the timber, reached the place where he had left his borrowed roan. He checked the cinches, swung astride. The spinning had gone out of his head and his strength was returning quickly.

HE WASTED no time trying to follow the vanished Mike Cottrell. Instead, he turned his bronc on a downward course, putting Telescope Peak behind him and heading again toward the lower hills.

A good many hours had elapsed since the holdup and there was not much daylight left. Already the golden haze of late afternoon lay upon the rugged lava hills and their forest mantling. Wayne Morgan wanted as soon as possible to find Blue Hawk. He had no idea where to look for the Yaqui, but he thought likely his partner would be looking for him, and that it would not take the Indian long to effect a meeting.

Sure enough, with startling suddenness and no warning hint of his presence, a rider on a gray horse all at once appeared out of the timber above and ahead of him, quartering at an angle to cross Wayne Morgan's path. Morgan waved a salute, and a moment later the two friends reined in facing each other in the stillness.

Blue Hawk gave Morgan's bruised face a quick scrutiny.

"You look as though you had lost a fight, Senor," he said drily.

The white man made a rueful grimace. "I lost it good!" he admitted. "To a better fighter. I just hope you've had more results from your afternoon than I have!"

"I'm afraid not, Senor," said Blue Hawk, with a shake of his head. "The sheriff's men didn't help much, the way they rode over the sign and trampled it out. It took almost an hour to find it again."

"But you did find it?"

"What there was to be found. But that soon played out, and I had to give it up. In these hills, Senor, it is not easy to follow a man who wants to lose you, and who knows the country better than you do."

Wayne Morgan was disappointed, but not too much surprised. Even Blue Hawk couldn't do the impossible, and he had been handicapped by the blundering of the sheriff's posse.

"You couldn't get any idea which way the trail might have headed when you lost it?" he asked.

"Well—" Blue Hawk hesitated. "Of course it's no more than a guess. But the outlaws could have been making for the Golden Lady."

Morgan looked at him quickly. "That's one of the closed-down Syndicate mines?"

"Yes. I haven't told you, Senor, what happened last night when I followed this Hube Dekins hombre there. It was interesting."

He related the adventure briefly, and Wayne Morgan listened with narrowed eyes.

"A suspicious-acting gent, all right," he agreed. "And now you figure the holdups might have headed for the mine?"

"I don't know that they were, for sure, Senor."

But Wayne Morgan had suddenly framed a course of action, based on what Blue Hawk had told.

"Quick!" he grunted. "Where have you made camp, Blue Hawk? Is it far from here?"

"Not far. I'll show you, Senor."

A few miles farther off Blue Hawk led his partner into a sheltered glen, so remote and deeply hidden among brush and trees that it was not likely to be discovered even by a person riding quite close to it. There was grass here, and a small clear spring that bubbled out at the foot of the rocks.

Here the Yaqui had made their comfortable temporary camp, piling saddle-packs under a slight recess where they would be protected from the weather. Firewood and kindling were gathered and stacked beside the remains of the fires he had already built. And in the grassy pocket at the rear of the glen, two horses grazed at pickets—a pinto, and a handsome black stallion.

The black lifted its head as the two men rode into the camp, and looked at them with intelligent eyes. For this was Midnight, the mount of the Masked Rider, almost legendary throughout the West for his speed, intelligence and powers of endurance.

Thought of the foodstuffs that he knew were in the stack of supplies against the rock made Wayne Morgan suddenly feel hollow. Except for a half cup of scalding coffee, he had had nothing to eat since early morning, and this was adding to his weakness.

"How about breaking out some grub, Hawk," he said. "Quick, while I'm throwin' a saddle on Midnight?"

The Yaqui looked at him. "A job for the Masked Rider, then?"

"Yes. Maybe a wild notion, but worth tryin'. I'll explain while we eat."

BY THE time he had blanket and bridle on the stallion and the saddle cinched down, Blue Hawk had grub ready —in this case merely a couple of cans of beans which they punched open with their clasp knives and ate cold, Morgan not wanting to take the time to start a fire. And as they shoveled the food into their mouths, he explained what he meant to do.

"There's one way," he said, "to settle for sure whether or not Hube Dekins is mixed up with this fake Masked Rider, and that's to put him to the test. It will be dusk in another thirty minutes, Hawk. Suppose at about that time a man in a robe and a mask were to show himself at the Golden Lady, and let Dekins get a look at him. What do you think would likely happen?"

"Nothing, maybe," Blue Hawk replied. "That is, if Dekins is guilty and thinks the man he sees is someone he knows. But if he's innocent then, Senor, I'm afraid he's likely to start shooting. And he is a dangerous man with a gun."

Morgan nodded. "I'll take that risk. It'll be worth it to prove whether that old caretaker is in this thing up to his neck. I'm almost morally certain he was the one who tried to bushwhack Sanderson."

Blue Hawk had another suggestion. "Perhaps Dekins himself is the false Masked Rider? Had you thought of that?"

"Yes, but I doubt it. I got a good look at the gent who is masquerading as me, during the holdup this afternoon. He was a bigger man than Dekins, bigger all through. And I certainly didn't see any beard. No, unless I read the cards wrong, the old fellow is merely a cog in the scheme. But he could prove to be the means of cracking it wide open!"

He had tossed aside the empty can, was about to turn away when Blue Hawk stopped him.

"That shoulder, Senor! You had better let me take a look at it."

The time lost irritated Morgan, but he

knew better than to argue. For a mere scratch, the wound had given him considerable trouble, and if it started bleeding again while he was playing his rôle as the Masked Rider, it could even give away his identity. So he held still while Blue Hawk stripped off the shirt and bloody, makeshift bandage, and examined the tear in the flesh of the upper right arm.

With deft, sure movements, the Yaqui washed it clean with water from the spring, then smeared over the wound some pungent ointment for which only a redman would have known the formula. Almost as though by magic, the fire began to die in the muscles of the arm. Binding it again, Blue Hawk said:

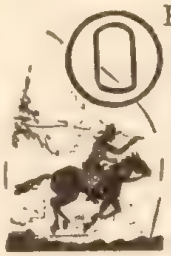
"Don't let it get stiff, Senor; and it will be all right."

"Thanks, Hawk," Morgan said, gratefully, as he shrugged into his shirt.

It was not the first time he had experienced the magic working of the Yaqui's uncanny native skills and been thankful for them.

CHAPTER IX

Death of a Caretaker



OPENING the blanket roll stashed beneath the rock overhang, Morgan produced the garments he needed for his transformation to the eerie figure of the Masked Rider. Quickly he fastened the black robe about his shoulders, slipped the black domino mask over the upper half of his features.

Blue Hawk was already in saddle when, drawing on the black sombrero that completed the somber regalia, the Masked Rider swung into the saddle of his great stallion, Midnight.

The stallion, restive after a period of inactivity, tossed his head with pleasure as he felt his rider settle into leather. The robed man gave the glossy neck a friendly slap.

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

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"Always ready for action, aren't you, boy?" he observed, in a deep voice that was strangely altered from the easy tones of the drifter, Wayne Morgan, and held nothing of the Western drawl of the cowboy.

Even Blue Hawk, the one man living who knew the truth about the robed rider's identity, sometimes found it hard to find any trace of his easy-going friend in the grim, inexorable figure of the man now in the black mask.

"Let's ride then," said the Masked Rider. "Lead the way, Blue Hawk."

They rode out of the glen, into the fading light of the dying day.

It was near dusk when they sighted the sprawled buildings of the Golden Lady. From the shadows they looked out upon the closed-down mine, seeing it as Blue Hawk had the night before—silent, lifeless except for the dim shine of candlelight behind a window of the shed which served Hube Dekins for a home. As they watched, they saw a shadow cross the window and knew the caretaker was inside.

"It would be easy to sneak in on him unseen," Blue Hawk said.

Then the moment the robed man had been waiting for came, as the door of the shack opened and the gaunt shape of Dekins appeared. He went over to a woodpile and an axe-head gleamed in the fading light as he set to work splitting kindling.

Quietly the Masked Rider eased Midnight out of the shadows and started slowly forward, coming in toward Dekins' bent and laboring figure. He had barely left the shelter of the trees when the bearded man heard or sensed his presence, and straightened quickly with the ax in his hands, staring.

A word from the Masked Rider halted the big stallion, and he sat his saddle motionless, waiting to see what the old fellow would do. He saw the caretaker pivot to run a hurried glance about the clearing and the mine layout, as though checking to make certain no one was lurking there.

Then Hube Dekins lifted one gaunt arm above his head, in a gesture to the man on the black horse, and immediately fell to work again with the ax.

"You saw that?" the Masked Rider called back softly to his friend in the trees. "He signaled me in! I guess this proves what we want to know."

"And now, Senor?" Blue Hawk prompted from his hiding place.

"Stay close. I think I'll have a little talk with this gent!"

The Yaqui laughed silently. "Then I'm afraid he's going to be due for a shock!"

A slight pressure of the knees was all it took to send Midnight forward. Hube Dekins had finished his chopping and was gathering up an armload of pine chunks. Holding them against his gaunt chest, he started toward the shack without even looking again at the approaching horseman.

The Masked Rider followed him to the shack and swung down, dropping the reins to ground-anchor Midnight. He stepped inside, closed the door, and put his shoulders against it.

Hube Dekins had deposited his armload of wood, with a clatter, in a box beside the stove. As he opened the stove and began shaking down the ashes, preparatory to laying papers and kindling toward the building of a fire, he shot a glance across his shoulder at his silent, black-robed visitor.

"Well, why don't you set down or somethin'?" His voice was a high-pitched rasp. "And take off that mask. There's no use tryin' to show off to me with it. In fact, hombre—" Dekins spoke louder above the racket he was making with the shaker—"Maybe you noticed I aint' even afraid to turn my back on you. Not now, not after the letter I wrote yesterday!"

CHUCKLING gleefully, he set to work building his fire.

"I been wondering from the beginning," he went on, "just how I was goin' to make sure you'd never try to doublecross me, or put a bullet in my back when you figured I wasn't any further use to you. Well, I've got you stopped now! That letter is my insurance policy. Everything's in there

—the whole plan, every last detail. If anything happens to me, it'll be opened and read. And, brother, you'll be finished!"

The old fellow's shoulders shook with mirth as he appreciated his own cunning. Still, the man at the door said nothing. It pleased him to let the caretaker ramble on, giving him every chance to spill whatever information he might.

But Dekins was through talking, and as the silence lengthened he turned abruptly and threw his visitor another sharp glance.

"Well, let's have it! What's chewin' on you?"

On an inspiration, the Masked Rider answered: "Ward Sanderson. Your bullet missed him last night."

"But I thought that was the idea!" Hube Dekins cried in an exasperated, whining voice, as he pivoted about. "I thought you wanted him give a good scare, to show him he's the one we—"

His voice broke off then. His eyes popped wide and his bearded mouth went suddenly slack. For the first time it broke through to Hube Dekins that this was not the man he had thought he was talking to.

A grim smile tightened the lips of the man in the mask. "Why, what's the matter?" he asked pleasantly.

The caretaker could only shake his head a little, still staring, with an expression of sick horror settling upon him.

"You're *him!*" he croaked. "You're the real—" The words seemed to choke up in his throat, unfinished.

"Are you so surprised?" the robed man asked, his voice quiet but containing a chill that would probe into the backbone of an enemy. "Did you think you could go on this way indefinitely? Didn't it occur to you I'd decide one day it was time to step in and put an end to these goings-on?"

Hube Dekins swallowed. "I—I warned him!" he groaned bitterly. "I told him he was playin' with fire, using that disguise. But he wouldn't listen to me!"

"*Who* wouldn't?" demanded the Masked Rider, and immediately saw that he had played the wrong card.

Dekins was frightened, but he had a certain capacity for stubbornness, even face to face with this mysterious phantom of the dark trails. His red-rimmed eyes had narrowed suddenly at the question, and his bearded jaw clamped shut.

"I've talked all I'm goin' to!" he snapped.

A stare that had gone bleak and glacial bored at him through the hole of the mask.

"You'll do yourself no good, keeping silent," the robed man warned icily. "You've just admitted you don't trust this accomplice of yours enough to turn your back to him. So why make it tough on yourself in order to shield him?"

"I'm through talkin'," repeated Dekins. He braced his gaunt shoulders, as though against a blow.

The Masked Rider had to admit a grudging admiration for such a display of nerve. Still, this man had information that he needed and meant to have. A gun slipped into his hand, whispering against holster leather. Deliberately he paced forward until the muzzle of the gun was shoved against the caretaker's lean middle, and their faces were only a few inches apart.

Dekins was scared all right. His bearded features showed a greenish tinge, and there was a greasy shine of sweat across his forehead despite the fact it was so chilly in that cabin, with night fallen outside, that his panting breath made a small frost upon the air.

Flipping back the skirt of the man's dirty denim jacket, the Masked Rider revealed a long-barreled Colt shoved into his waistband. He jerked this free, tossed it onto the table.

"You're asking for whatever happens to you now," he said. "You know that, don't you?"

THE old prospector's continued sullen silence had him frankly a little baffled. He gestured with his gun-barrel toward the tumbled blankets on the bunk.

"Sit over there for the time being," he ordered. "And keep out of mischief!"

As the old man slunk away to obey, he

turned his attention to a quick scrutiny of the contents of the shack.

He didn't know what he hoped to find. Still, there might be something—some clue that would free him from the need of taking harsh methods. A first glance however, indicated that the chances were slight.

The cabin was as bleak a place as Blue Hawk had reported it to be, with its scanty furnishings of crude, knocked-together odds and ends. Curiosity took the masked man over to the bank of shelves, to lift down a wooden box he saw there. But this contained nothing more than a dozen or so chunks of rock that showed glints and threads of brightness in the candlelight as he ran his hand over them.

Remembering that Hube Dekins had been a prospector in the old days of the big strikes here, and was supposed to have found and lost a number of valuable claims, the Masked Rider said with a glance across his shoulder:

"What are these—your souvenirs? All you've got left to remember—"

The next moment he was spinning sideward, the box and its contents clattering to the floor. For he saw Hube Dekins in a crouch, a mad gleam lighting his eyes, his lips pulled back from the snags of yellowed teeth. And the six-shooter he had managed to sneak from a hiding place beneath the blankets of the bunk was whipping into line, and at that instant its muzzle tipped with flame.

His haste, together with the robed man's quick move, spoiled his aim. The fly-blown window went out in a smash of glass. And by that time the Masked Rider had again snatched up the gun he had briefly laid aside in order to examine the box and its contents. He didn't want to shoot, but Dekins was already pulling trigger a second time, and he was given no choice.

Tipping the barrel up, he aimed at the man's gun arm and squeezed off his shot.

Both guns spoke together, their concussion ear-punishing in the confines of the small shack. Hube Dekins' bullet thudded into the floor boards, gouting up a long sliver of pinewood. And then, in dismay, the Masked Rider saw the man begin to crumple.

For at the last moment Dekins had moved violently to one side, throwing himself directly across the sights of the masked man's gun, in the very instant that the backlash of the trigger action bucked against his hard palm.

The weapon fell from Dekins' fingers. Hurled about by the direct strike of a .45 shell at close quarters, the caretaker was thrown against the timber of the bunk and rolled off it. He struck the floor limply.

CHAPTER X

Flight

STRIDING quickly forward the Masked Rider stood over Dekins. The man lay on his back and his lips snarled hatred and defiance, even as death began to glaze his staring eyes.

"Curse you!" he breathed hoarsely. "I almost got you! I almost was the hombre who finally dropped the Masked Rider!"

Blood gushed from the slack lips, staining the tangled beard. The gaunt shape of Hube Dekins jerked convulsively, once, then his eyes rolled back into his head and the stiffness ran out of the gaunt frame.

The masked man stood looking down at him, holding in his hand the smoking gun with which, through an unlucky accident and the dead man's own crazy persistence, he had been forced to kill Hube Dekins.

He was not a man who ever killed if it could possibly be avoided, but remembering that this caretaker had taken a part in the breaking of the Sanderson's and had shot at old Ward last night, he could only feel that Dekins had deserved his fate. He punched the spent shell from his gun and shoved it, still smoking, into holster leather. The silence in the cabin was oppressive, after the smash of the guns.

But now, against the stillness, there

came from the outside the quick sound of a horse's hoofs crossing the broken rock that littered the clearing about the old mine. The horse pulled to a quick halt and Blue Hawk's voice called sharply:

"Senor?"

Heeling about, the masked man strode to the door and threw it open. Full dark had come now, with only a last pale glimmer of light across the sky where the stars were already out in force. But enough candle gleam fell through the shattered window and the door to show Blue Hawk in the saddle of the gray, leaning anxiously to ask:

"You are not hurt?"

"No," the Masked Rider assured him. "He tried for a gun and I had to stop him before he could get me—and before I had a chance to learn a thing from him!" He shrugged, beneath the robe. "Well, it's too bad, but there's nothing anyone can do about it now!"

Blue Hawk had dismounted and the robed man drew back to let him enter the shack. The Yaqui stood looking at the dead man, not touching him. He looked about at the mean interior of the shack and noticed the wooden box and its scattered contents where they had been spilled when the Masked Rider made his swift, defensive draw.

"Gold samples?" he queried.

"Yes." The Masked Rider stooped and picked one up, tossing it in a hard palm. "Souvenirs, probably. All the old man had left to him, to remember a long, hard life and the fortune that more than once had just slipped through his fingers." His eyes behind the holes of the mask narrowed thoughtfully. "Or now, just maybe—"

"Senor!" A sibilant exclamation from Blue Hawk cut him short. *"Listen!"*

The Yaqui had turned toward the door. His partner could detect no sound in the stillness of the mountain evening, but he knew better than to doubt Blue Hawk's keen senses.

"What is it?" he demanded.

Then he heard it himself—a rumble, as of distant thunder, but growing constantly nearer. Horses—a bunch of them! Galloping straight toward the old mine.

"Someone heard the shots!" he cried. "Quick! Hit saddle!"

Blue Hawk needed no prodding. He was outside and vaulting into leather even before the words had left the lips of the man in black. In seconds the Masked Rider had reached Midnight and, grabbing the ground-trailing reins, swung quickly up.

Blue Hawk had already started for the timber, calling "This way!" The Masked Rider rode after him.

Behind them, at the foot of the clearing, the first of the horsemen were just breaking out of the trees. As the fugitives crossed a barren hump of rock, the bat-like silhouette of the robed man on the black stallion was limned for them briefly against the stars and the pale night sky.

"By hell, there he is!" Sheriff Joe Wake bawled. "We've got him!"

GUNS began slamming and the posse, which had by some stroke of ill-fortune been within hearing of the shot that killed Hube Dekin, was spurring hard after the two fleeing figures in the dusk. Only a lead of fifty yards or less lay between.

No ordinary horse could match Midnight for speed, of course, but the Masked Rider had to hold him back, depending on Blue Hawk's native instinct to guide him in the darkness and through the unfamiliar tangled hills.

A bullet whined so close that he thought he could feel the concussion of it tap his cheek. A gun was in his own hand as he twisted in saddle to look back at the pursuit, but he had no quarrel with any of those riders and he would not risk a shot.

Then the trees closed around him and for the moment he was lost in utter blackness, with not even the stars visible, with only the ground that blurred beneath Midnight's flashing hoofs, with the echo of their running slapped back by the pressing wall of the timber.

The posse came pouring after them at reckless speed, pressing them hard. It

seemed to the masked man a kind of miracle that one of the horses didn't stumble and go crashing in the treacherous, sightless footing. But it seemed to be an old, forgotten trail of some kind that Blue Hawk had discovered, and the sure-footed mounts kept to it without faltering.

When the timber opened they flashed down a rubble-littered slope, into the V-shaped trough where a raging mountain creek tumbled over the steep pitch of its bed. Rounded stones clattered underfoot and water that was lacy in the starlight fountained up as their mounts took the stream in galloping strides. They were heading up the farther slope, toward a stand of scrub cedar, when the vanguard of the sheriff's riders broke into view behind them.

The posse was not sparing of lead, but shooting was a chancy proposition under those circumstances, and the distance was still a little far for a hand gun.

Still, they were holding doggedly to the chase and unless the fugitives were to turn and shoot it out—a thing which, for every reason, the Masked Rider was loath to do—then it seemed doubtful how the thing would end. Both fugitives were seeking desperately for some way to throw the posse from their trail, even for a moment or two, and give them a chance to lengthen the hopelessly small lead they had so far been able to hold.

The land became rougher, even more tilted and up-and-down. Even Midnight was beginning to wear down under such harsh going, and the posse had had to drop back. But they were still there, with the sheriff apparently determined not to miss this opportunity, having actually laid eyes on the Masked Rider.

The fugitives topped the head of a steep ravine, and a jumbled field of boulders and scrub growth and lava outcrop slanted away before them, with a high, lone peak shouldering above it. Threading a course among this scatter of rock and brush, they all at once pulled up as they saw a drop-off open before them.

The Masked Rider held Midnight at a stand and quickly threw a long look around. Ahead was the steep slide, cloaked by a thicket of manzanita that stretched clear to its foot where the timber began. At their back were scatteretd shrubs and boulders, some of them as tall as a horse. A large rock balanced at the very edge of the drop. Observing it, he all at once got the inspiration he needed.

"Blue Hawk!" he gritted. "Quick! Give me a hand here!"

Without question, the Yaqui dropped from saddle as he saw his partner leaping down to earth, though he didn't know what the marked man had in mind until he saw him step to the boulder and set a shoulder against it.

Quickly the Indian leaped to his aid. Side by side, white man's boot and Yaqui moccasin braced against the earth, they strained with the weight of the boulder. Above them, the racket of the posse could already be heard as they topped out of the ravine and hit the rocky bench.

For a second it looked as though the two had staked their chance on a bad guess. Then the boulder tore loose from the hold of the soil, and slowly toppled. As it started to roll, ponderously, they leaped clear.

THEY were already reaching for bridle reins as the big stone began its crashing tumble down through the tough manzanita branches that clothed the slope below. When the sheriff's men came in sight the two were back in the screen of the rocks and brush, crouched beside their horses and ready to reach for a muzzle if one of the animals started to fill its lungs for a betraying whicker to the mounts of the posse.

"Down that way!" Joe Wake was yelling, as the horsemen pulled at the lip of the steep drop. Hear 'em breakin' through the brush? Come on!"

"Not me!" a posseman objected vigorously. "That ain't my brand of suicide! Maybe they made it, but not every fool can be that lucky!"

The horses milled at the edge of the slide, as the men argued, the sheriff

unable for all his prodding to get any of them to risk the danger of that steep, uncertain drop through spiny manzanita. He started to curse them for yellow cowards, but hadn't got far when the voice of Caleb Gorham broke in with a dry reasonableness that calmed and silenced him.

"No call for such language, Joe," the attorney said. "Let's be calm and think this out. I don't care to risk my neck, either, trying to take a slide like that one. I'm not a good enough horseman, and I don't have that much faith in this plug I've got under me. But maybe we can find another, easier way down there."

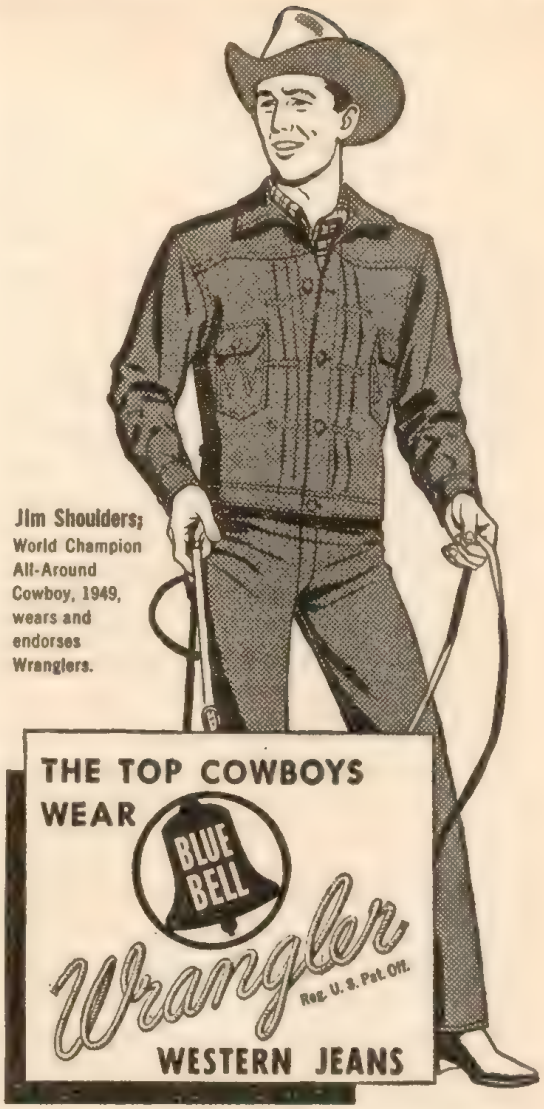
"Well, let's start finding it then!" the sheriff grumbled, accepting the argument as final. "More like than not, we've already lost that pair."

After a few minutes more of fruitless debating, the posse reached a decision and went streaming off along the edge of the drop-off, hunting a way down. They had no more than got out of hearing when the two men hidden in the rocks hit saddle once more and were backtracking, making use of every precious second that their ruse had given them for throwing the posse completely off the track.

In a few minutes the Masked Rider reined in, satisfied that they were beyond pursuit, with only the starlight to aid the pursuers. While the tired horses had a blow, the two friends talked the situation over.

"Things are about to start popping," the robed rider prophesied. "I'm heading for camp now, and a change of clothes. Hawk, you'd better get back to the mine and lie low for a few minutes, to see if the sheriff doesn't show up after he realizes he's lost us. I think he will, since he didn't have time to investigate the shooting he heard, and he'll naturally be curious to learn what that was all about. Watch, and listen to everything that's said when they discover Hube Dekins' body. After that, hurry and report to me, as fast as you can make it. Because, as a result of what's happened at the Golden Lady

[*Turn page*]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tonight, I figure this whole thing is ready to break wide open!"

CHAPTER XI

A Fatal Delay

DISGRUNTLED, Joe Wake finally gave orders calling off what had clearly become a futile search.

"We almost had 'em!" he growled. "Damn it, they were practically in our hands, but they're gone now. There'll be a moon in another hour, but that can't help us any."

The tempers of all the possemen were short as they accepted the sheriff's admission of defeat.

"So what do we do?" somebody demanded.

"What do we always do? Go on home—and thanks anyway, men, for your help. You did as much as anybody could."

Most of the men from Dutchman's Camp took their departure, with a final grunted exchange of farewells. Caleb Gorham remained at the sheriff's side, as did Ben Hubbard, with the two riders he had brought from the Block H camp.

"I'm wondering about the shots we heard just before we sighted that masked hombre at the Golden Lady," the rancher said. "They meant somethin'."

The sheriff nodded. "I'm thinkin' about that myself. All in all, I'd say it was a lucky idea of yours, suggestin' we drop by and talk to Hube Dekins. Just too bad we didn't get there five minutes sooner than we did!"

Silence rode with the knot of horsemen as they retraced their steps toward the shut-down mine. The place looked eerie and deserted, the door of the caretaker's shack standing open on a black interior. The candle stub which had served Dekins for a light had either burnt down and sputtered out in melted wax, or a draft had snuffed it.

Reining in, the sheriff called:

"Dekins!"

His only answer was the sough of wind in the pines beyond the clearing.

"I have an idea the fellow isn't going to answer—not ever again!" Caleb Gorham said drily.

"You have, huh?"

Grim of face, the lawman swung down and moved toward the door of the shack, the others following.

Fumbling out a match, he scraped a flame against the edge of the jamb and as the feeble light steadied the first thing he saw was the glint of it shining on the staring eyeballs of the man who lay on the floor, beside the bunk. An involuntary shudder traveled down his back. He took a deep breath. The match sputtered out.

One of the men behind the sheriff, blocked from a view of the room by his bulky shape filling the entrance said:

"Well?"

"It's Dekins," Wake answered gruffly. "As dead as they come—and killed by the Masked Rider!" Remembering what the match flame had showed him he felt reluctant to step inside that squalid shack. "Somebody lend a hand to tote him out here. Caleb, how about givin' us light while we do it?"

Ben Hubbard entered the shack with the sheriff, while the lawyer struck matches one after the other to guide them. They took no unnecessary time in lifting the body of the dead man, and carrying it out between them into the clean air of the starry night. Nor did they bother to look around at this place that had been Hube Dekins' home. Once, the sheriff stepped on something hard and he merely booted it aside, noticing that a scatteration of small stones lay about the puncheon floor, but paying them no more attention than that.

"Where's that flea-bit mule he had?" Joe Wake demanded. "It must be around somewheres. I'll take 'em both into town, and see about givin' the hombre a decent buryin'."

One of the Hubbard's punchers located the animal, staked out to graze in a grassy pocket not far from the mine buildings.

They got Dekins' corpse hoisted into a jackknife shape across the animal's back, despite the mule's objection to the smell of blood, and the sheriff tied Dekin's body on, bearded head and long arms dangling from one side, gaunt legs dragging from the other. That unpleasant chore done, Joe Wake went back to his own waiting mount.

There was no more to be done here. After a few more terse words, the riders split—Ben Hubbard and his buckaroos striking out for their camp below Telescope Peak, the sheriff and Caleb Gorham taking Dekins' body with them for the trek to town.

None of them had any hint of the presence of a figure which, shadow-like, flitted away from the corner of the shack where it had observed every movement and heard every word spoken. Even before the echoes of their bronc's hoofs had faded out, Blue Hawk was already in the saddle of the gray and heading for the camp in the glen where his partner of the trails would be awaiting him.

HAVING doffed the regalia of the Masked Rider and strapped a saddle to the bronc he had borrowed at Dutchman's Camp, it was Wayne Morgan again who greeted the Yaqui with an eager request for news. Blue Hawk gave his report briefly, and Morgan nodded with grim satisfaction.

"So Gorham is on his way back to Blue Spruce with the sheriff!" he grunted. "That means there's no time to be lost!"

"How do you figure, Senor?"

"You remember that letter I told you about, the one Dekins gave the lawyer to keep in his safe and to open only in case something happened to him. Well, the old fellow is dead, though not quite the way he was expecting it would happen. That letter will tell the name of the man Dekins was mixed up with, the man he thought he was talking to this evening when he saw me dressed in mask and robe."

The Yaqui nodded. "I understand. Then the whole mystery is about to be solved, Senor, and you naturally want to be in at the finish?"

"It may not be that simple. When the man we're after learns of Dekins' bein' killed—if he don't know about it already—he'll take steps to see that Gorham don't get a chance to read the letter! That's why we've got to hurry!"

They took time only for Blue Hawk to switch saddle from his fagged-out gray to the pinto—Morgan was still riding the borrowed horse—then they set out at a steady, mile-eating clip.

The moon had come out now, to put a silvery sheen upon the pines and show the way plainly and make it possible to maintain a fast gait. Quickly they struck the main stage road, then the steady drumming of their horses beat a rhythm against the sounding board of the night, following the easy, downward pitch of the looping road as it led through the lower hills toward Blue Spruce.

Alternately running and resting their horses, they came at last in view of the town's lights, scattered upon the slope where the timber ended. At the edge of the settlement Morgan pulled in.

"Lay low, Hawk," he said, "but be ready! I may need you!"

Then he sent the mustang down into the streets of Blue Spruce.

He didn't think Gorham and the sheriff could have beaten him in by a wide margin, if at all, despite his own delay in starting. The lawman and the lawyer were on tired horses, and besides it would have been somehow unseemly to hurry too much, with that mule and its grisly burden in tow. Morgan and Blue Hawk, on the other hand, had pressed hard and cut steadily upon the head start the other pair had on them.

Morgan came past the high fence of the Sanderson freight yard, with the bare ribs of the wagons showing in carefully spaced ranks above the barrier. The wide, high-arched gate stood open. He had started to ride by it, intent on reaching Caleb Gorham's office, when a man stepped suddenly from the shadows and a voice he knew to be Sheriff Joe Wake's lashed at

him sharply through the dark.

"Morgan?"

Something in the voice prompted Morgan to pull rein, though anxious to be on his way.

"Yes," he said. "It's me. What do you want?"

"A few words with you, feller! Some things I want to ask you."

"Well, I hope you can make it quick!"

"Yeah?" The sheriff stood with arms akimbo. His face was only dimly visible as he slanted a look up at the man in saddle, but his tone held a plain note of skepticism. "What's all the rush? Where are you in such a hurry to get to?"

"Gorham's office," Wayne Morgan said, then checked himself.

Since it was obvious he had just ridden into town, he would hardly be expected to have learned yet about the killing of Hube Dekins. Therefore his interest in getting to the lawyer's office wouldn't be easy for him to explain.

Fortunately Sheriff Wake didn't press him on that point.

"Well," he merely said, "whatever you want with Gorham can wait a minute, I reckon. There's a little matter on my mind that needs takin' up. Step down and let's go in and have a little talk about it with Ward Sanderson."

Morgan saw no way to get away without risking the sheriff's ire. Chafing at the delay, he followed the lawman.

Joe Wake's horse was tied to a hitching pole in front of the lighted stageline office. Morgan racked his own lathered bronc beside it and preceded the sheriff through the doorway.

WARD SANDERSON sat at his roll-topped desk, frail and tired-looking in the spill of yellow lamplight, with the burden of worry pressing heavily upon him. As the two entered he looked at Wayne Morgan, then past him at the sheriff, and his eyes held a question.

"It was him we heard all right," Joe Wake said. "Somehow I had a hunch that it was, the way he was pushin' his bronc. Don't know how I knew, exactly, but I was right."

"Well?" Wayne Morgan prompted him, turning so that he could face both men at once. He thought he could guess what was coming, from the suspicious cast of the sheriff's face. Might as well get on with it.

"Where you been all afternoon, Morgan?" Joe Wake demanded heavily.

"I was with you for most of it," Morgan reminded him.

"Yeah, but you run out on me, as quick as you could. Told me a yarn about wantin' to come back and report to Sanderson on the holdup." He swung his glance to the old man behind the desk. "How about it, Ward?"

The white-thatched head shook, and a frown was on the seamed features.

"I've already told you, Joe, that he never showed up here."

"So just where you been, mister? You've got a lot of hours to account for!"

"I don't see why," Wayne Morgan retorted coldly. "You've certainly no reason to be suspicious of me, have you? As for where I've been, for all you know, maybe I got an idea and tried to do some trailin' of my own."

"Maybe." The sheriff's voice was dry, his stare holding blank disbelief. "And maybe not. I've kind of started wonderin' about you. Comin' into this setup, a stranger, workin' yourself right into the middle of it, gettin' Ward Sanderson's confidence. And that holdup this afternoon. It could have been faked, you know."

Morgan's blue eyes flashed. "No fake about this wounded arm!"

Joe Wake shrugged. "An accident then. One of the raiders shootin' closer than he was meant to."

"Now just a minute, Sheriff!" Ward Sanderson exclaimed, with a look of concern as he sat up straighter in his chair. "What you're hintin' at is plumb serious, somethin' I'm reluctant even to consider. Wayne Morgan behaved bravely this afternoon, and drove off the Masked Rider and his outlaws almost single-handed. Are you really supposin' the holdup was staged, that he's somehow mixed up with

the men who did it?"

"Exactly what I'm supposin," the sheriff snapped. "If I'm wrong I'll apologize —later! But the whole thing is blamed suspicious. There ain't many men quite as brave as he's made himself out, chargin' straight into the teeth of a dozen blazin' guns. He *says* he knocked over a couple of the raiders. But nobody else seen 'em fall, and we never found the bodies or even any sign of blood!"

CHAPTER XII

Killing!

COLDLY calm, Morgan faced his accuser unspeaking, his mouth drawn into a hard, straight line. He waited, to let the lawman get it all laid out, the cards all spread face up on the table.

"But why? cried Sanderson hoarsely. "For what purpose could the outlaw raiders have done such a thing?"

"Why, to make you believe in this stranger, of course," Wake explained impatiently. "To get him so deep into your confidence you'd never question him again. Maybe the Masked Rider thought you were gettin' onto the other man—whoever that is—who he already had planted in the organization!"

Sanderson's worried glance shuttled to Morgan's set, grim features.

"What have you to say about this, Morgan?" he demanded. "Let's hear your side of it."

"I can only say," Morgan answered, "that he's guessin' and guessing wrong! He can't produce a shred of proof, and—"

Before he could finish, a single shot broke the night, muffled by distance and intervening walls. Taut nerves sent all three men whirling to the door.

"Aw, it's probably nothin'" the sheriff said then, gruffly angry at his own jumpiness.

"It came from over in town," old Sanderson exclaimed worriedly. "And Pat stepped out just a few minutes ago, said she had to see Caleb Gorham about some business matter!"

At those words Wayne Morgan was in motion. He wrenched open the door and rushed out to his waiting bronc, a cold certainty gnawing at him that this delay had been a fatal one, and that tragedy had already fallen. He put spurs to the hammerhead roan as he dashed madly for Caleb Gorham's office. . . .

The first thing Caleb Gorham had done, after returning from the hills and getting free from the sheriff and the excited crowd that had gathered to greet their arrival with Hube Dekins' body, was go to the barber shop for a soak in the claw-footed zinc tub in the public bath at the rear.

Here, safe at last from the clamor of questioning voices, he was able to relax his saddle-weary body and turn his thoughts to the startling course of the day's events. Afterwards, in the dining room of the hotel, he sat alone and listened to the voices around him, answering any attempt to draw him out on the matter of Hube Dekins' killing with a cold stare through thick-lensed spectacles, and a clipped suggestion that Sheriff Wake was the man to see.

He was half through his meal when he remembered the caretaker's letter, now in his office safe. He broke off eating for a moment and almost started from his chair, but settled back to finish his supper, on his beak-nosed face nothing more than normal scowling thoughtfulness. As soon as he had finished, however, he went directly across the street to the rooms that were his office and bachelor quarters.

Gorham generally left his door unlocked, and he walked in and went with the unerring sureness of one in familiar surroundings to the desk, found the lamp, and got it burning. Adjusting the wick, he replaced chimney and shade and stood a moment frowning at the big box safe in the corner of the office. He went to it. knelt down, and began to work the combination.

His concentration was such that he failed to note the slow swinging open of the door that led into the bedroom adjoining the office. A board creaked beneath the pressure of a boot but at that moment the last tumblers fell, and the creak of the safe door opening under Gorham's fingers blanketed that other sound.

The contents of the box were methodically arranged and he quickly laid his hand upon the envelope he was looking for. Gorham took it from its pigeon-hole and turned it over and over in his dry, yellow fingers. It was a bulky affair, obviously containing a large number of papers. On the front of the envelope, Gorham's own name was inscribed in the laborious scrawl of Hube Dekins.

The lawyer was turning back to his desk, one thumbnail prodding at the seal to rip it open when he heard the click of a gun going to full cock. In the stillness of the room, it was a startling sound. His head jerked up quickly, and he stood that way, frozen motionless and staring.

"Don't open it, Gorham!" said a man in the bedroom doorway. "Just throw it on the desk. And hurry up about it!"

HIS somber clothing—the black robe that covered most of him, the black mask with the eye-holes that hid his face—so exactly blended with the darkness of the room beyond that at first Caleb Gorham saw nothing past the dazzle of the lamp that stood between them, then only the gleaming eyes, the lower half of the face, the glint of the leveled gun. Fear tied convulsive knots within him.

He was able to think, in a brief flash of understanding:

"He's been here, waiting for me—how long? Waiting until I opened the safe?"

Then, obeying a voice which, though deliberately roughened and disguised, was somehow naggingly familiar, Gorham dropped the envelope to the desk top. It lay there, an oblong shape in the circle of lamplight.

The masked man paced slowly into the room, his eyes boring into those of the lawyer. He reached out a gloved hand, plucked the envelope from the desk top without taking his eyes from Gorham's face, and stowed it away somewhere under the robe. Then came the voice again, heavy with menace:

"Was that all? Think real careful, Gorham!"

Caleb Gorham had to clear his throat to force speech past the constriction in it.

"It's all that Dekins gave me." His mind was racing, asking incredible questions. "Where have I seen that tall, solid shape before? I must be crazy! This is the Masked Rider, and it can't be that we've ever met!"

"Maybe it's all he *gave* you," the masked man persisted, "but are you sure he didn't do any talking, say anything that he shouldn't have? Maybe I ought to kill you, Gorham. Just to make certain of you!"

"No—*no!*"

The eyes behind the thick-lensed glasses bugged with fright. The dry, soft hands lifted and spread as though to hold back the bullet that lay beneath that eared-back gunhammer.

"I swear I know nothing! Nothing at all! All the old man said was, 'Open this and read it in case anything happens.'"

His words stumbled, under the weight of that cold regard.

"Maybe I don't believe you, Gorham!"

"You've got to! I swear—"

It was in that instant that both men heard footsteps running lightly up the flight of outside stairs leading to the office door. Muttering a curse, the masked man turned involuntarily. Caleb Gorham, seeing a desperate, possible chance, made a lunge for the desk and a gun that he kept in the closed top drawer.

His attempt was doomed. The robed man caught the movement from the tail of his eye. The gun-barrel blurred reflected light as he swung it back. Gorham's yellow-skinned hands were pawing at the drawer when the gun spat flame and lead. To the smash of the shot, Gorham cried out, then he was stumbling, falling forward across the desk, sagging

to the floor in a limp heap.

The door was wrenched open. On the threshold, Pat Sanderson halted and a gasp of horror broke from her as she stared, white-faced, at the scene before her.

But the masked man was again in motion. In two strides he was at the door and had seized Pat's arm, hauled her inside the office and given the door a kick to slam it shut.

"All right—keep quiet!" he ordered, in that oddly roughened voice. "I won't harm you if you don't make a sound."

Her eyes were on him, probing the eyes behind the holes of the sinister mask, and the mouth and chin that were revealed beneath it. A sudden convulsive stiffening ran through her slim body, as he still held her trapped by that hard grip on her wrist.

"I *know* you!" she cried breathlessly, incredulously. "Oh, no! It can't be!"

The mouth below the mask went tight-lipped. The grip on her wrist tightened. The masked man bent toward her.

"So you know me!" he grunted. "So much the worse for you! Much as I dislike it, you don't leave me any choice! No!"—as she suddenly started tearing to free herself—"I'm not going to kill you, not here. If you'll be reasonable, I'll spare you. But you're goin' with me until you make up your mind. And we'll have to hurry, the whole town will be up here in a minute, because of that fool makin' me shoot! Come on!"

THE masked man left the lamp burning, left everything just as it was, in the need of getting away as hastily as possible. The girl struggled and fought, but he was too much for her. With a quick movement he pouched his gun and clamped a hand across her mouth to stifle her attempted scream. Then he had the door open and was half-forcing, half-carrying her outside and down the rickety steps into the darkness that lay thick behind the store.

There, drawn back into the shadows, he halted a moment still holding Pat tight to prevent her struggling. Quickly he keened the night, registering the shouts and the sounds of running feet converging on the place from which the gunshot had sounded. Plainly there was little time in which he could make his escape.

His black mount was tied at the rear of the building—a big, heavy-barreled animal, easily capable of carrying double. Pat was forced to mount and the masked man swung up behind her. Then they were weaving a rapid course through the dark alleys and back streets of the town, avoiding any patches of lamplight and quickly leaving the uproar at the lawyer's office behind them.

Soon the last of the houses fell away. They rode through trees, over a silent carpet of needles where even the moonlight failed to penetrate through the thick branches overhead. Climbing, the black

[*Turn page*]

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with its double burden swung gradually until it suddenly struck the stage road, looking like a mottled silver ribbon across the timbered lava hills. Here, after a careful survey in both directions, the masked man jumped his horse down the bank and pointed northward along the trace, straight into the heart of the hills.

Pursuit, if it came, would probably be delayed. Meantime, the best time could be made by sticking to the road, rather than trying to beat a way through the tangled rock and timber.

Pat Sanderson rode in a kind of sick terror, compounded of horror and revulsion. The touch of the man who rode behind her filled her with a lothing such as she had never known. She had not yet recovered from the first shock of the moment when she had looked into the eyes of this masked figure and—incredibly—had recognized him.

Neither spoke for a long time, but rode steadily in a silence broken only by the rhythm of the black's hoofs. Occasionally the robed man halted to give the bronc a rest from its double burden, but even then nothing was said.

Finally, however, he broke the long silence.

"I think I'd better blindfold you now."

"Why?" she retorted coldly. "It's a little late for that, isn't it? Now that I know your secret?"

"You don't know where I'm takin' you, though. And I'd rather you didn't find out. Where's the scarf I saw around your throat?"

She fumbled for it, but it was gone. "I guess I lost it," she said.

"Then I'll have to use somethin' of my own."

NEXT ISSUE

THE VALLEY of the UNDEAD

A Masked Rider Novel

By T. W. FORD

AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER XIII

Accused

FORLONLY, with the folds of a handkerchief bound tight across her eyes and her hands tied behind her as a precaution, Pat Sanderson rode through a confusing world of blackness. She had only a dim idea of the passage of time, or of direction. After a while she thought that they had turned out of the main stage trace, though they still seemed to be following some sort of beaten road.

The night had turned bitter cold and the thin shirt and jeans she wore were little protection against it. But she made no complaint. She would ask this man for nothing—not ever again!

Presently the motion of the black halted and the man called a name softly. A second voice answered, from a little distance.

"You, Chief?"

"Yes. Comin' in!"

Again they went forward. Loose stone rattled under the bronc's irons. As they halted, boots crunched the stones and a man came pacing toward them.

"What—what's happened?" the voice of another guard exclaimed. "What's she doin' here?"

"No time for explanations!" snapped the man in the mask. "You'd better go after the crew, fast. By the time you get them here I'll be finished with what I'm after and we'll pull out."

"And the girl?"

"I'll take care of her. Now—ride!"

The boot sounds crunched away at a run, and a minute later a horse struck away at a fast clip, the hoofbeats quickly fading. The masked man was already out of saddle.

"All right, step down!" he ordered Pat. He steadied her as she moved awkwardly, with her hands tied and without sight to guide her. "Walk straight ahead," he growled.

She nearly stumbled on the loose rocks, then caught her footing. A door creaked open near at hand.

"Inside," the man grunted. "Don't trip."

A stale and musty stillness enveloped her, pungent with a tang of chemicals. The man followed her inside and swung the door closed again.

She asked herself, in bewilderment, where she could be. And what would happen to her here. . . .

As Wayne Morgan tore out of the stageline office, with a sweep of his hand, he had his bronc's reins free of their mooring to the hitch pole. But as he reached for the saddle-horn to vault astride, a hoarse shout from Sheriff Joe Wake and the lawman's excited lunge through the doorway frightened the nervous animal and it pivoted, skittering away from Morgan.

Then the sheriff was rounding the hitch-rack, and a gun-barrel flickered in his hand.

"Stop where you are, Morgan!" he shouted. "Don't think I won't shoot!"

"Don't be a fool, Sheriff!" Morgan gritted. "We've got to get to Caleb Gorham's office as quick as we can make it!"

"Gorham? What's happened to him?"

"Nothin'—I hope! And I also hope nothin's happened to that Sanderson girl, if she was there with him. But we're wastin' time!"

Ignoring the gun, Morgan got hold of the pommel, hoisted himself quickly into leather. A sharp drag at the reins brought the horse around, practically on its haunches. A kick sent it forward at a leaping run toward the high, arched gate. The sheriff hesitated only a moment, then he was pouching his six-gun as he whirled to his own waiting bronc.

Ward Sanderson, in the office doorway, sent a quavering question after the pair but they were gone without answering. The old man started running, without any idea of what was afoot, but sensing urgency in the manner of the other men.

The sheriff was trailing closely when Morgan had covered the two blocks separating the freight yard from the main center of the town's business houses. Men were in the street and in doorways, staring about perplexedly. Morgan reined in his skittery bronc and yelled at one of them:

"Where was that shot fired?"

The man made a vague gesture. "I didn't know, mister! Nobody seems to know."

MORGAN went on, the sheriff right behind him now. A light burned in the windows of Caleb Gorham's second-story office, and the door at the head of the outside steps was standing open. Considering the chill of the evening, that small fact shouted with significance.

Morgan was out of saddle almost before the mustang had come to a dust-plunging halt, and rushing up the rickety wooden flight, the sheriff at his heels. In the doorway they halted, searching quickly and for the first moment thinking the room was empty.

Then Morgan saw something move in the shadows behind the desk and a choked, bubbling sound broke the stillness. It brought them both quickly forward, rounding the desk.

Lying in a heap against it, his yellow face turned up and his broken spectacles beside him, Caleb Gorham's body still held a bare flicker of life. His eyes stared dully behind half-lowered lids; his blood-flecked lips trembled with the effort of speech as the two knelt beside his bloody figure.

"Caleb!" the sheriff exclaimed hoarsely. "Who did it? Who shot you?"

The thin chest lifted with the lawyer's effort to answer. Faintly, horribly, his voice came in a moan of dying strength.

"Mask—black mask—"

His bold head dropped sideward, against the hand Joe Wake had put out to steady him. One clawlike hand twitched and fell limply open. The sheriff released a long, slow breath and exchanged a glance with Morgan.

"The Masked Rider! And he ain't long gone, either. You can still smell burnt powder!"

Morgan lifted his head for a look about

the room. The wooden stairs were echoing now to the tread of townmen's pounding boots. Opposite, the door to Gorham's living quarters stood ajar. Quickly Morgan came to his feet and strode over, kicked it open.

There was enough light from the lamp on the desk behind him to show the room was empty. There was a chest of drawers, a table, a cot and chair, and no place where anyone could be hidden.

Excited men were crowding in from the stairway entrance as Morgan turned back into the office. In a corner, next to the window overlooking the alley, stood the big, green-painted iron safe, and its heavy door hung slightly ajar. With a stride Morgan reached the safe and jerked the door open, revealing the stacks of papers that filled its compartments.

"No point lookin' for it," he grunted. "It won't be here."

"Lookin' for what?" demanded the sheriff, who had come to his feet and was facing him across Caleb Gorham's lifeless body.

"Why, the letter he told us he was holdin' for Hube Dekins. It should be plain enough it was on account of that letter that Gorham was killed."

"You think so?" The lawman's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "Yes, it just might be. On the other hand," he added bluntly, "I'd like to know how you come to savvy so blamed much about this business!"

Morgan's dark face went dangerous. "Are you still tryin' to pin something on me, Wake?"

"Still tryin'," the sheriff agreed, nodding. "But this time, I think I'm goin' to make it stick! When I stopped you a few minutes ago at the Sandersons' you were in one whale of a hurry to get down here to Gorham's place. You knew somethin' was goin' to happen. You've known, all along, a lot more than you've let on to. I aim to get to the bottom of it!"

"And every second we stand talkin'," Morgan retorted coldly, "the killer is gettin' farther away. And there's one thing maybe you've forgot. What about Pat Sanderson? Her father told us she'd come here, didn't he? Where is she now? What's happened to her?"

"I'm not forgettin'," Sheriff Wake said. "But first, I'm telling you to put up your hands."

"Put up your own!"

The twin Colts had slid into Morgan's fingers with such smooth, blurring speed that the sheriff was caught flat-footed, his intended move toward holster checked almost before it started.

"All of you!" Morgan added, swiveling his guns to cover the gaping crowd of men who jammed the doorway. "Lift your hands away from gun-butts and keep 'em there!"

FACE red with rage, the sheriff forced his trembling hands shoulder high, as the men in back of him hastily did likewise.

"You'll regret this, feller!" he gritted. "You're defyin' the law!"

"You've made it impossible to do anything else!" Wayne Morgan growled back at him.

The only entrance was blocked by the press of men in the stairway door, but a window was at his back and, below the window, he had glimpsed the roof of a low lean-to at the rear of the building. So, keeping one gun leveled and ready, he swung the other sharply and sent its muzzle smashing through the glass of the window.

With a few swift strokes he had the pane knocked clear. He shoved one leg through, then the other, and his body twisted so his guns could hold control of the crowd to the last moment possible. Then he dropped.

As he hit the tarpaper roof of the lean-to, pandemonium broke loose in the lawyer's office. But moving to vault across the edge of the roof to the ground below, Morgan heard the cry of a familiar and welcome voice:

"Senor!"

Blue Hawk was just below him, in saddle and holding the reins of Morgan's borrowed mustang. When Morgan leaped from the lean-to roof, it was to land light-

ly in the saddle. Then both mounts were tearing off down the alley, at a hard run. Behind them, the broken window was blocked by the figures of men leaning from it. A gun smashed, sending lead singing after the fugitives, but by then they were nearly out of six-gun range.

"Good work, *amigo!*" Morgan grunted, straightening about after a quick look backward. "I might have known you'd show up when I needed you. And that time, believe me, I did!"

The Yaqui made no answer. None was possible, just then, or necessary.

Already the town was rousing, but the fugitives had a good start and were free of the place before a pursuit could be mounted. When they were in the timber and Morgan had reined in a moment to check on the activity behind them, Blue Hawk offered his first word of explanation, and asked a question.

"I heard the shot, Senor, and I was sure it meant trouble and you might need me. But what happened?"

Morgan told him briefly.

"A masked man?" Blue Hawk said. "Then I'm afraid I let him get by me, by not staying where I was put."

"It's all right," Morgan assured. "I'm plenty glad you didn't."

"Oh here's something I found, Senor—picked it up in the alley behind the lawyer's office."

He handed over a square of silk—a neck scarf.

CHAPTER XIV

Face to Face

EXAMINING the scarf by moonlight, Morgan saw that a name was worked into one corner of the silk. The name was "Pat."

"The girl's!" he exclaimed. "I was right then. She was there, and the killer must have taken her with him." His fingers tightened on the scarf, and shoving it into a pocket he added, "It doesn't change my figurin'. If I've got this hombre figured right, there's still only one likely place for him to be headed."

"And that, Senor?"

"Why, the Golden Lady, of course. He's got Hube Dekins' letter, but he can't be sure Dekins might not have left some other evidence about the mine that would incriminate him if it's found. He'll have to check, to make certain, after that he'll likely ride to join his gang."

"Then it's the Golden Lady!" said Blue Hawk.

They sent their horses forward.

Only once did either of them speak as they applied themselves to making distance through the timbered, moonlight-stippled hills. That was when, during a brief moment given to breathing their lathered horses, Blue Hawk ventured to ask:

"Have you any idea yet, Senor, who this man is we're chasing? And why he should want to destroy the Sandersons?"

"No, Hawk," Morgan answered, after thinking over the question carefully. "My only hunch is that breakin' the Sandersons had nothin' at all to do with it, except maybe as a blind. Dekins as good as told me that. Whoever he is, the hombre has been after a lot bigger game!"

He pushed on without going into detail. And Blue Hawk did not prod him.

When they came in sight of the closed-down mine, it seemed deserted, and there were no lights anywhere. As they watched from the shadows and saw no evidence of life, a question began to nag at Morgan: Had he misjudged his man? The chance of saving Pat Sanderson suddenly looked dim.

Then Blue Hawk murmured: "Movement yonder, Senor—in the trees!" And as he sought in vain what the Yaqui's keener senses had detected: "A horse, tied up!"

Morgan knew a surging of relief hearing that. But he didn't know if the man he wanted would be alone or might have others of his gang here with him. On impulse, he stepped down from leather and worked at the saddle straps with which

his blanket roll was held in place behind the cantle. From it he took the black robe and mask of the Masked Rider, and quickly donned them.

"Here goes nothing," he told the watching Blue Hawk in the change of voice he always assumed, with the change of garb. "No telling what I'll be getting into, but if the gang is staked out there's a chance they'll think twice before they open up on anyone in this outfit. I'll play that chance for what it's worth."

"Then you want me to stay here, Senor?"

"I reckon you'll know, all right, when you're needed," the Masked Rider answered.

He stepped full into the moonlight, at any moment expecting a challenge or even the unheralded smashing of gunfire. But still there was nothing.

The caretaker's shack was dark and obviously empty, and he passed it, moving on toward the big, sprawling reduction shed. Reaching the lower end of this, he put his shoulder to the weathered timbers while he moved silently along the side, stepping carefully over the rubble that littered the ground.

A door stood blackly open at the lower end of the building which lay flush with the steep slope of the hill. The robed man listened for a sound within. Hearing nothing, he made a quick move through the entrance and to one side, to take himself out of the telltale square of moonlight that flooded it.

Gun in hand now, he waited, listening and peering about in the almost total blackness. A sense of the past closed in upon him, within the walls of this old building which had once throbbed to the pulsing racket of busy mill machinery. The dust of years lay thick, and imbued into the very timbers of the structure were the pungent, nose-tingling fumes of chemicals.

FROM a few window openings, moonlight seeped into the interior. The mill was constructed in tiers against the slope, so that gravity would aid in each step of separating ore and gangue until, here at the bottom of the building, the concentrates were finally sacked and loaded for shipment. A tangle of stairways and conveyor belts and flumes and various mill machinery, all long unused and thick with dust, stood about in the dim half-light and dense shadow of the interior.

As he stood listening, from somewhere above him came a distinct rustle of movement, the squeak of a rotten board. Then he saw a light, the faintest gleam that quickly flickered out. At once he started across the rotted boards, threading his way through the maze of equipment.

He found the handrail of a ladder ascending to the first tier and went up, his boots cautiously silent on the ancient treads. Here was more clutter of machinery, of conveyor belts and water flumes and bulky equipment, every inch of surface covered with a fine silting of settled rock dust.

There was no moonlight to aid him here, all the windows being sealed tight against the fierce weather of the region. But the man he was stalking was not on this level, either, and he felt his way carefully through the solid blackness, located a flight of steps and again ascended. And as he mounted through the levels of the building, he heard telltale sounds of that other—rummaging, searching, by the dim glow of lighted matches.

Suddenly, mounting still another ladder, the Masked Rider saw him. He was bent over and prying into a corner beyond a ricketty table, the match that burned in his hand vaguely outlining his shapeless black-clad figure. Carefully the Masked Rider stepped off the last rung of the shaky ladder onto solid flooring, gun leveled. And just then the other man in black straightened and turned.

For a moment they stood face to face in the flickering match-light—twin, awesome figures in batlike robes, eyes boring at one another through the slits of black half-masks. Then the match dropped in a sputtering arc of red and blackness swept in, and as it did two guns spoke in

a mingled crashing of thunder.

The Masked Rider, dropping to one knee as he hit trigger, heard the other man's bullet slash the air close above his head.

At the same moment, he knew that his own shot had missed its mark.

He lunged sideward, seeking the protection of the table, and while he was in motion the other man's gun spoke again with a brief flash that left a trail of powderspark hanging in the air. The Masked Rider struck the edge of the table, stabbed a hand against the floor to keep from falling, and punched a bullet toward the remembered flame of his opponent's weapon.

"I'm coming after you!" he shouted into the tail of the shot. "You've impersonated me, and committed your crimes in my name—and this is the payoff! I'm going to kill you!"

Through the throbbing silence that still held the echo of gunfire trapped within the building's narrow walls and low, slanting roof, he thought he could hear the sound of hoarse breathing, somewhere near. He waited, gun ready, the tang of cordite from its muzzle mingling with the other smells that hovered in this forgotten building.

"Curse you!" A rasping voice cut across the dark. "You can't stop me now, Masked Rider! Not just when I've brought my plans to the verge of payin' off!"

But there was panic in the voice, distorting it. The Masked Rider felt that it was a voice he should recognize, and yet was unable to place it. He did know, however, that the challenge was only false bluster. There was fear behind it.

For answer, he squeezed off a shot and heard the bullet strike a timber, go screaming in ricochet. The next moment his antagonist broke and was running, in full flight.

The Masked Rider leaped to his feet and started in the wake of those retreating footsteps. Panic had seized that other man. He could be heard lunging into the rusting machinery, caroming off, plowing ahead through the suffocating darkness.

THE treads of a ladder echoed hollowly as he scrambled up. The Masked Rider went after him, a Nemesis in robe and mask, bringing him full punishment for his crimes. He groped his way to the steps and mounted them lightly. Somewhere ahead, the fugitive was already climbing another flight to the uppermost tier of the reduction shed.

The Masked Rider's elbow brushed the cylindrical metal boiler of a huge ball mill. He felt his way quickly along it, and on to the ladder. Again he started up.

But, cornered, the other masked man had turned at last to fight. As the Masked Rider's head came even with the next level of flooring, a gun blasted. The bullet whanged into the boiler of the ball mill behind the Masked Rider, and sent ringing vibrations trembling through the old shed.

He ducked, hugging the ladder. His opponent had him pinned there, for there

[*Turn page*]

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was no other way to gain that last level. And the other man was back in deep, deep blackness that was made all the sharper by contrast with a square of moonlight pouring in through an open window in the wall. The Rider knew that this light touched the end of the ladder, however faintly. It would silhouette him there for a target whenever he dared to show himself.

Yet he did not hesitate. With the leverage of a grip on the ladder's handrail, and the drive of bunched leg muscles, he hurled himself over the edge of the flooring. He struck, rolling. The man in the shadows levered a shot that ran a streak of fire across the Masked Rider's hip. Then, lying prone, he had his Colt lifted and the hammer slipped from beneath a hard thumb. The weapon bucked against the heel of his palm.

Mingled with the exploding of the shell came a choked scream of agony. And as the Masked Rider eared back the hammer for another shot, he saw the other man come lurching out of the dark into the flood of moonlight filling that open doorway.

Holding his fire, he watched his double stagger and reel, hands clutching his body. He saw the black cape billow weirdly, saw the masked face jerk upward, the big hat falling to the floor. Then, in a death spasm, the man reeled toward the edge of the opening—and missed it. He spilled through it, went out of sight in a twisting fall.

Leaping to his feet, the Masked Rider ran forward. This opening, high in the side of the mill, was the waste door through which the crusher operator had once hurled worthless rock onto a pile of rubble on the slope below. Down there, on that rocky heap, a figure in black lay twisted and motionless, masked face turned up and cape spread loosely. Plainly, judging from the way he lay there, the false Masked Rider would ride no more.

His breathing running out slowly, the real Masked Rider broke the gate of his smoking gun and ejected the spent shells, thumbed fresh ones from the crossed holster belts that snugged his lean hips. As he clicked the cylinder into place again, he heard faint sounds from somewhere behind him, and whirled.

Dimly he could see the closed door of the room that would have been the super's office, when the mill was operating. Again the sound came, something striking against the bottom of the door. He stepped forward, gun ready, and gave the door a quick shove inward.

It struck some object, would open only part way. But the next moment he had slipped through and was kneeling to tear loose the bonds which held Pat Sanderson helpless, so that only by kicking her heels against the door she had been able to attract his attention.

Freed, and with the gag removed from her mouth, Pat sat up and looked at him wildly. A hand on her arm to steady her, the Rider said:

"You're all right now. He's dead. He'll not harm you again."

"Then you—" she exclaimed, staring at him in the light that seeped through the dusty office window. "You must be—"

"Yes," he told her. "I'm the Masked Rider, the real one. I hope by now you know I had nothing to do with the evil that has happened here!"

"Of course," she said. "I know that now."

He slipped a strong hand beneath her arm. "Let's get out of this place."

CHAPTER XV

Settlement

WHEN the Masked Rider and Pat emerged from the building, Blue Hawk was standing over the dead man. The Yaqui turned as they walked toward him, and the voice of the usually stolid redman sounded a little shaken.

"I saw him fall from up there, Senor," he murmured, indicating the waste door high in the side of the mill. "And I couldn't tell for sure that—"

"That it wasn't me?" the Masked Rider finished. "Take off his mask, Hawk, and let's see who he was."

"I know who he was," Pat said, in a leaden whisper, as Blue Hawk knelt to slip the mask from the dead man's face.

But at that exact moment there came a startling interruption. A bunch of riders had broken from the edge of the timber, their approach muffled until then by the thick needle carpeting beneath the trees. Nine or ten of them came clattering across the rocky open while Blue Hawk leaped quickly to his feet, reaching for a gun. Both the Masked Rider's long Colts slid into his hands.

"Careful!" the black-clad man gritted, waiting.

Suddenly the horsemen were pulling rein, still some distance away, and one of the leaders lifted his voice uncertainly across the intervening distance.

"Chief?"

Faces were shadowed by hat brims, but even in the moonlight it was possible to read the uncertainty that had gripped the lot of them.

"That ain't the Chief!" one of them cried in a high-pitched and excited voice. "Who's that with him? An Indian! It's the Masked Rider himself!"

"Yes!" snapped the robed man, and his guns were leveled. "He's right! Your boss is dead, here at my feet. The game is up, and if you've got any sense, you won't try to—"

But before he could finish speaking one of the gang pulled for holster leather. And with the first shot, that scene broke apart in a blasting of gunfire.

Grimly the Masked Rider hit the trigger. He threw lead into that mass of men and lunging, frightened horses, saw a saddle emptied. Beside him, Blue Hawk spilled a second rider to the rocky earth. But lead was singing about them and the girl stood exposed to its fury.

"Into cover!" the Masked Rider ordered her, harshly.

And as she seemed dazed by the quick breaking of events, he flung an arm about her and pulled her down behind the crest of the hillock of waste rock that had been built up beneath the window in the mill wall.

Blue Hawk leaped after them into this shelter. Prone, the two fighting partners leveled their guns across the top of the mound where the dead imposter lay, and hurled their fire at the riders beyond.

Those men seemed careless of everything but the determination to finish these two who had killed their chief. They rushed the mound, fell back before the determined fire the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk threw at them. Three of their number were down now, their horses galloping away with empty stirrups flopping.

"Circle 'em!" one of the crowd was shouting. "Get behind 'em and blast 'em off that rock pile!"

The masked man's jaw set. He knew they could not hold out long once that strategy was put into effect.

Then, strangely, a new gun opened fire from somewhere at his left. He swiveled a glance in that direction, saw the flame of the weapon. A rifle. The slap of the shots ripped through the confusion of six-gun fire and a rider spilled from leather.

Again and again the unknown rifleman levered his weapon and threw high-powered shells into the mass of horsemen. This attack from an exposed flank, coupled with a renewed defense by the pair pinned atop the waste heap suddenly crumpled the morale of the horsemen. Cries of panic broke from tightened throats. Then, as another bullet from the Masked Rider's guns found a mark and another man flopped lifeless out of saddle, they broke completely.

Broncs pitching and screaming in fear, they reined about and flung themselves into the protection of the trees. They left half their number behind them as the battered remnants of the gang took flight and drummed away. The echoes of the battle died; stillness settled.

THE Masked Rider rose and pouched his guns, turning to the frightened girl.

"It's over, Miss Sanderson," he said

gently. "That gang will never rob another of your father's stages!"

A man came running into the moonlight, the rifle he had used to help disperse the killer crew still trailing from his hand. As the tall, solid shape came toward them, they saw that their mysterious helper had been Mike Cottrell. The big yard boss paid hardly any attention to the men. He hurried instead to the girl and seized her shoulders.

"Pat!" he cried. "Pat, honey! Did he hurt you? Are you all right?"

She smiled at him, a little waveringly.

"All right, Mike. Thanks to these men."

Cottrell turned to them. "You're the Masked Rider?"

"Yes," said the robed man, and looked at the masked figure that lay prone at his feet. "And this one here?"

Blue Hawk, interrupted before by the furious onslaught by the gang, knelt now and stripped the mask from the dead man's face. It stared up, sightless, at the stars—the handsome face of the Block H rancher, Ben Hubbard.

A MOMENT'S silence was broken by the Masked Rider's quiet voice.

"He should have Hube Dekins' letter on him, Hawk. See if you can find it."

It was in a pocket of the dead man's coat. The Yaqui handed it over, and by the light of a match the masked man thumbed through the contents quickly. There were assay reports, and a lengthy manuscript in the caretaker's crabbed hand. But he already knew enough so that a mere glance was all he needed.

"The whole story is here, I think," he said, refolding the papers and handing them to Cottrell. "I had guessed a part of it when I saw the box of ore samples in Dekins' shack—though not quite all. Dekins, an old-time prospector, had been poking around in the Golden Lady and found an unsuspected rich vein. He had it assayed, found out it was worth millions. Since he could do nothing by himself, he went to Hubbard and, together they schemed a way of getting control of the mine without rousing the suspicions of the Syndicate that owned it.

"Under the name of a phony company, they offered to buy the property for the value of the old machinery in the mill. But the Syndicate was not too eager to sell, since they were already thinking some of reopening the mine themselves and trying to recover some marginal profit from it through the use of modern and improved methods of working it. Consequently, they named a price that was considerably higher than Dekins and Hubbard had figured on. Time was growing short, because any day the Syndicate's engineers might show up to look over the property and they would find the new vein.

"So Hubbard and Dekins had to get money quick. The Block H wouldn't carry a mortgage of that size. Hubbard took the only way he could find. He used his crew of tough riders and began waylaying the money shipments, holding his gang with promises of big pay when the Golden Lady had been bought and was in operation. He hit on the disguise he used as a way of shunting any possible suspicion, and sometimes he could be in one place while a member of his crew wore the costume and pulled a raid somewhere else. Like the other morning, when he was in town at the time the freight wagon was burned."

"I still can't quite believe it!" Pat Sanderson said in a lifeless tone. "He pretended to—to be in love with me."

"Why, as for that," said the masked man, "I don't doubt that he was—until the day Hube Dekins came to him with his discovery. After that, nothing else had any importance for him. Even the breaking of your father's freighting business was a minor matter, if he could get hold of enough money to buy the Golden Lady. He was playing for big stakes." He looked at Mike Cottrell. "But what about you, fellow? Apparently, you'd been onto Hubbard for some time. What made you think he was guilty?"

The big fellow had an arm around Pat and she fitted into the curve of it as

though she didn't mind at all being there. He gave an embarrassed chuckle.

"Mostly just jealousy, I reckon. I'd been in love with Pat for three years, but without the nerve to tell her. Then he came along and put his ring on her finger. I been sour on the world, I'm afraid, ever since. Anyhow, when this trouble started, it was mighty easy for me to get suspicious of Hubbard, on little or no evidence. I started spyin' on him and his crew, even neglectin' my work to do it. And tonight it paid off when I saw a rider come into the roundup camp and heard him tell the crew Hubbard had kidnaped Pat and wanted 'em to join him here at the mine."

The Masked Rider smiled a little.

"Well, it looks as though she's in good hands now," he said. "And this whole mess is finally straightened out. You give that letter to the sheriff, Miss Sanderson. It clears up everything. It also tells where the loot is hidden, on Block H. Blue Hawk and I will have to be riding now."

"But isn't there any way we can thank you, for what you've done?" the girl protested. "And make it up to you for being wrongly accused of crime.

"That's not necessary," he said. "However, there's a young fellow named Wayne Morgan, too, who's had some trouble with the sheriff over his part in these doings. He was working with me, as a matter of fact. I'd appreciate it if you'll explain that to Joe Wake."

"Morgan?" Mike Cottrell echoed. "Is he a friend of yours, Masked Rider? Golly, I wish I'd known that before I tangled with him! The man's a scrapper!"

"You're no slouch yourself, Cottrell," the masked man said, and amended quickly, "Or so at least Morgan tells me." He turned away abruptly. "Come, Hawk!" he said. "Let's trail!"

In the trees, they mounted their horses.

"Where now, Senor?" asked Blue Hawk.

The Masked Rider flexed his arm. The pain had all but left that wound, and the bullet scratch upon his thigh was not enough to bother him.

"We'll pick up our gear," he said, "and the roan that's waiting in the stable at Blue Spruce, and leave this borrowed mount. Then, if you feel like a little ride, I'd like to push on south before we camp. A friend of mine needs help with some cattle thieves, along the Sambre. I'd like to make distance that way tonight."

"Then south, Senor!"

No more needed to be said. They were always most content, this pair of fighting saddle partners, when riding side by side toward some new gunsmoke adventure.

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LITTLE LAWLESS ONE

The hawk swooped at his enemy

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Nature is the referee when the mink and the hawk fight their battle

by Paul Annixter

IT WAS a strange and unreal world, the yellow-gray kingdom of the dunes. A fantastic domain of sand and water, wind and storm—tranced and death-like—where every footfall, every movement except the movement of wind or of wings from aloft, was muffled in shrouding sand.

It was a world of little folk, a kingdom in miniature. It had its jagged mountains and precipitous valley. These valleys and mountains had their sparsely forested slopes, their densely wooded fastnesses but they were elfin landscapes, all of a neutral hue, formed of the shifting sands and the hogs-manes of stunted larch and sand-cherries that had found purchase on their arid slopes. In their pathless maze a man might hear a gun fired off two hundred feet away and be unable to tell the direction. There the unskilled hunter might seek to penetrate and be hopelessly lost within a mile.

Once the mighty roamed those sandy reaches—the caribou and the elk, the prairie and timber wolves, the black bear and the demon wolverine. But these were

not cunning enough to cope with the menacing sands, surrounded as they were by towns. All have gone the way of the buffalo, faded like snow before the roads and settlements of man. Only the smallest of the meat-eaters now remained, the mink and weasel, the raccoon and the shrew, who had found there a last sanctuary wherein to breed and hunt meeker and tinier animals.

Upon an afternoon in October one of the smallest and most ruthless of these lay curled up within the safe dry heart of a rotting log. Putoris, the mink, most deadly assassin of the dunes, was for the moment at truce with the world. Since dawn he had lain there, tail over nose, peacefully as any kitten.

The mellow fall sunlight permeated the powder-dry log with an even, comfortable warmth perfectly tempered for slumber, drawing a pleasing aroma out of the tinder-dry wood. Just now he was resting with cat-like complacency, his little eyes like bits of black tourmaline and full of a sinister intelligence, watching his front doorway for some sound intriguing enough to draw him forth. For such as Putoris are never too replete to kill anew and sip fresh blood.

FOR two weeks the hush of fall had added itself to the natural hush of the duneland. Fall had come, still and without banners here, but wonderfully rare and trancelike. Most of the birds had migrated. The hopping, churring life of the insect world was stilled by death or hibernation.

This was the magical time of year beloved by Putoris past any telling. Time when the pelts of the smaller fur-bearers were glowing with condition and the air of the dunes was charged with mystery. Time of still bright nights when the Hunter's Moon bathed the thickets with a strange and argent brilliance, turning Putoris' blood to liquid fire in his veins.

These were the nights when he could flow from shadow to covert, from covert to grass tuft so silently that not even the nesting grouse could hear him approach.

Presently would come the hour of four, that populous second feeding time of the thicket world. Then the rabbit families would leave their coverts and go slipping in silent files toward the willow dips, when wood-mice would shuttle back and forth on hidden runways bearing seeds, and Phit, the skunk, would lead her stodgy family forth on their evening stroll that ends at nine.

Within his hollow log Putoris continued to wait, a cruel, hard, implacable light in his beady eyes. That gleam was wont to turn red on the trail of meat. Not that he hungered, nor yet thirsted, unless you include the unquenchable thirst of all his kind for fresh warm blood. He was intrigued with the age-old game of ambush, waiting awhile though sleep had fled, to see what might be pounced upon before issuing forth on his regular night-shift hunting.

A half hour passed in which the mink remained still as stone. He watched the gray vista of sand and thicket that dropped away before his threshold. Then his fierce bright eyes were fired with a sudden cold rapacity and the circle of his curled body stirred and poured upon itself, snake-like.

A baby cottontail came hopping into view, its course leading it directly toward the watcher's log. Putoris flung himself on guard, his thin back bent like a bow, his head, the flat, triangular head of all deadly things—whether beast or serpent or man-made weapon—drawn back snakily on its long heavily-muscled neck. All innocence had vanished now from his attitude. His face was the face of a bad dream. The little eyes were fired with that sharp, hateful scrutiny, that glitter of malice, that marks all the weasel kind.

The approach of the rabbit was maddeningly slow and indirect. Momentarily it paused to sit up and question the breeze. Within the log Putoris seemed to have stopped breathing, yet his complex and high-strung nervous system was threatening to snap under the tension.

Finally but five feet separated the rabbit from the log. With a rippling quiver

Putoris' short legs released his lithe body in a chain-lightning rush through his open door. But that rush, timed though it was with the nicety of the expert killer, fell short. For in the same second or the latter part of the one preceding, something happened.

The rabbit shot into the air with a bound of panic desperation in its bulging eyes. It went streaking away with the speed of light, keeping pace, as it seemed, with a flitting shadow that also went sliding across the sands. Putoris, who had followed up his fumble with an indescribable leaping, rippling, doubling dash which even then might have overtaken the quarry, stopped dead in his tracks. Poised like an image of bronze, upreared on his haunches, he cocked a cruel snaky glance into the thickets ahead. He saw nothing, however. Only, a moment later, a single broken death-cry came from the rabbit as the life was struck out of it but a yard from its hidden burrow.

PUTORIS continued to watch and listen. There was the cold ferocity of several fiends in his little red-lit eyes. The rabbit had been his rightful prey. The prize already had been as good as his, for his tracking was sure as death itself. He had been in the act of overtaking his quarry when the rabbit had been struck down by this unknown, unseen pirate.

Therefore as he crept forward through the thickets, there welled up in Putoris the most terrible rage he had ever known. That rage was increased when, at the end of a careful stalk, he discovered—nothing. Nothing but a slash in the sand marking the spot where the rabbit had been violently done to death and whisked into thin air.

The killer of the rabbit, a raking, slashing, clipper-built goshawk, which is the peregrine falcon of feudal times, had arrived in the dunes only the day before on his flight southward ahead of the winter cold. After an easily surprised meal amid the stillness of the larches, he had decided to tarry and make the dunes his habitat at least for a time, for it was quite plain that the small life of this thicketed realm had never known the deadly prowess of one of his robber kind before.

He was a mature bird, measuring sixteen inches from tail to crown—sixteen inches of winged disaster. His claws were almost the claws of an eagle and edged like knives. His hooked beak was a sickle, no less. The dark curved markings on either side of it looked like a pirate's curling black mustache, marking him for the murderous swashbuckler he was.

The fact that the goshawk is almost the fastest bird that flies, that he possesses the mysterious gift of the falcon family for following automatically every twist, double and turn of a victim in the air or on the ground, and that murder is his natural profession, must be added to the picture. In short, the dunes were to be beset by another and even greater despot than Putoris.

When the hawk had made his stoop for the fleeing rabbit, he had been well aware of Putoris all the time. There was nothing, in fact, in the air or on the ground that was missed by those prism-binocular eyes of his. The fact that the rabbit should rightfully have fallen beneath the claws of the mink mattered nothing to this lawless harrier of earth and sky.

He knew that mink were fearless, chain-lightning fighters in their own underworld of the thickets. While he would have hesitated deliberately to attack one of Putoris' clan, he could afford to hold the mink's enmity as negligible by reason of his mastery of the air. Above the earth he was as much of a symbol of death as the mink was on the ground. He was entirely aware of the challenge of his act as he rose with his kill—a challenge that might lead to a long and lasting feud.

YET at all times living up to his bandit role, he disregarded the fact and sent back a further challenge from the air. It was a harsh triple scream which sounded like "Killeee, killeee." Then he disappeared among the trees.

Though Putoris had never heard that sound before, nor yet had contact with a

goshawk at first hand, it needed not experience to interpret that cry or its import. At the sound his thin black lips writhed back in a snarl of stark ferocity that was startling to see, and his little eyes took on the glow of embers. For instinct seemed to whisper even then, all that lay ahead.

The rest of that afternoon and the twilight that followed, as Putoris threaded the larch shadows in search of grouse, or flowed like a gold-brown flame up and down the stunted evergreens on the track of squirrel, his fierce glance was ever directed ahead. He burned for a sight of the hawk, which as yet he had not actually glimpsed. And twice more that day he found signs of the other's presence.

Once it was in the form of a miracle—and wild folk, especially those who live without the law, have a horror of miracles. The trail of a red squirrel he had seen running through the larches by scent, just as a hound runs a trail on the ground, was discovered to lead to—nowhere. That trail simply ended, died out, abruptly and with utter finality, in the center of a broad glade of frost-silver sand, seventy feet from any tree or shrub. It was as if its maker had vanished suddenly into the land of spooks. Which is exactly what he had done. The unclean smudge in the pristine sand betrayed the secret.

The squirrel had been violently snuffed out of this life in mid flight. Two cruel claw-marks, that were larger than Putoris' whole head, told how. The claw-marks of a bird beyond a doubt, a bird that was taloned like a wild-cat! Once again Putoris stopped dead in his tracks and sat erect on his haunches while an almost inaudible gibbering sound came from his wrinkled lips. Then he left that spot as if he had been stung, with a speed that might have been taken for fright were it possible for one of the weasel clan to know fear.

Not many minutes thereafter he came upon the second sign, the badly torn and half-eaten carcass of a cock grouse on which some taloned fiend had dined but recently. No trail led to or from the remains but beside them on the sand were two downy brown-barred feathers. Those feathers smelt exactly as the claw-marks had smelt.

Putoris, as he sped away from that spot, swore strange and terrible things in rage and defiance—you could see him doing it though he vented little or no sound—and again his going was fearsome to watch. The gait of a mink is ever a startling sight. It is neither canter, gallop nor run and resembles the going of a snake as much as it resembles anything at all because of the ridiculous shortness of the legs.

Putoris' body was eighteen inches long while the length of his legs was little more than two. Times he covered the ground in four or five-foot leaps. Times he writhed and darted along the ground like a serpent, or arched his long, thin back like some fearsome nightmare of a measuring worm.

Putoris' movements, that night, were the embodiment of swiftness and precision, his hunting more than ever a carnival of cruelty and terror. Subtly changed, more deadly and agile than he had been for many weeks, he flowed through the thickets like a consuming flame, as if he were maddened by torture or pursued by fiends. The torture was that of impotence to retaliate against the insult of the unknown enemy.

Such fiends as he are beings of despotic wrath and this invasion of the hunting range he had come to look upon as his own especial domain, had goaded him to frenzy. An insatiable blood madness rode him this night, a fever that had nothing to do with the filling of his belly. He would kill, kill, kill! Only thus, it seemed, could he fling defiance in the face of the unknown raider from the air.

Along the upper ridges as the moon rose that night, the owls in the larches stopped their hunting to stare down at the scene of slaughter among the thickets. Rats and wood-mice inhabiting the crannies, amid the blow-downs, turned giddy with fear at what they saw and heard from their doorways. For Putoris had become death on four legs.

All the weasel kind love dramatics and tonight Putoris was reveling in the terror of his own name. Again and again he would single out a sacrifice from among the rabbit folk and run it down for the sheer joy of carnage. He was never one wholly and decently to devour a kill. Now he stopped only long enough to quaff a bit of warm blood from the throat of a victim before passing on to another.

THIS was but the beginning of the queerest feud the dunes had ever known, a prolonged contest of cunning and savagery between two skilled assassins, based on a despotic pride in lethal prowess.

For a week thereafter wherever the goshawk hunted among the dunes he found increasing evidence of the work of his rival the mink, who continued to outkill him six to one. Not lacking in wile, the fierce bird read aright the macabre challenge written in the fresh spore about the carcasses of the slain—his own and the mink's—and not for a moment was he in doubt as to who the other killer was. His own hunting became wary, with an eye out constantly for another sight of the sinister form of the mink, but throughout that time he was rewarded by no further glimpse of Putoris. But wherever either hunted he found that the other had been ahead of him on the trail.

As the days passed fierce murder glints began to play in the eyeballs of each at every fresh manifestation of the other's presence, although Putoris was not yet aware of the identity of his rival. Each of the killers was becoming the evil genius of the other. Their paths were ever crossing. Many a trail of rat, hare or squirrel Putoris ran only to have the quarry frightened to earth by the shadow of his enemy planning overhead. Or worse, he would find the half-devoured carcass and those grim three-taloned claw-marks in the sand beside it. And many a time the hawk returning in the afternoon to a kill he had made in the morning, discovered that the mink had visited the place.

It was not until the second week that Putoris first sighted his enemy. It was late afternoon. The goshawk perched grim and motionless on a bare upflung snag. Putoris was plying through the thickets toward his twilight hunting ground. The hawk might have launched a surprise attack on the other from on high, but as always a caution, tinged with awe, restrained him. The mink froze in his tracks and for a long minute returned the other's fierce stare, one foot upraised. He, too, might have devised a night attack upon the other but a similar healthy respect restrained him.

Such a game of wholesale slaughter, as these two played, soon made itself felt throughout the whole expanse of the dunes. No such pair of able killers can ply their craft for long in any range without a disastrous effect on the squirrel and rabbit crop. The game of Putoris' range, though sufficient for one such despot, soon grew scarce for two, and by the end of four weeks both bird and mink were hunting longer, harder and farther each day. Truth was the two now spent a large share of their time in watching and hunting one another, fired by an ever-growing hatred.

About this time the first of the November snows came sifting through the larches, rounding off the contour of the dune landscape with a two-inch covering like white frosted sugar, coating every twig and branch. Air off the lakes became like a tenuous faint blue haze beneath the leaden sky. The squirrels of the region, never being over-plentiful, now kept close to their holes all day.

The lessening ranks of the cottontails were growing warier and warier from unprecedented onslaughts on the ground and from the air. Many, indeed, had removed to distant parts. And still the goshawk through some perversity, showned no sign of removing to a warmer, more favorable, hunting ground.

As a matter of fact the whole affair was outside of the hawk's dominion, for Nature who harbors no ungoverned outlaws in her scheme, was but using him as a means toward her hidden ends.

IT WAS on a day in late November that the situation forced its own drastic conclusion. Of late, Putoris had been hunting throughout the afternoon as well as the night, driven by the growing pinch of hunger as well as a growing obsession to out-kill the hawk. Within him, too, was a burning desire, stronger each day, to miss nothing that his enemy the goshawk might want. Therefore, he was often led to cover his entire domain within each twenty-four hours.

Always he found the sign and seal of the other hunter's presence—soiled and carmine spots in the snow where some bird or beast had been violently done to death and eaten on the spot. The inordinate wrath and outrage of a despot, mounted within him, all the keener because of its futility, for the winged brigand was proving too much for him.

On the afternoon in question a cathedral stillness of cold and snow lay over Putoris' world. No life seemed stirring. Even the gray jays, who roved daily in a clamorous gang among the larches, were silent. This is proof positive that something was wrong with the wild this day. The whole dune world seemed hushed and at pause, with finger to lips as it were.

Equally silent and doubly watchful Putoris slipped through the thickets, his orbs pointed with fierce reddish glints in the shadows. He swarmed through crevices and crannies among the blow-downs seeking to chivvy out some rodent as an appetizer, but today the imminence of something lay heavy over his kingdom. The dune world might have passed for the domain of the dead. Once a gray and shadowy presence seemed to float swiftly away above a gun-sight cleft in the sands, soundless and of startling size. Putoris sat erect and craned, but the shadow did not reappear.

The mink's ill temper increased. He seemed a thing without bones, so swift and imperceptible was the play of his short legs. The oblique black markings about his mouth were wrinkled in a soundless grimace. He was out to find what was wrong with his world today. He found it quick enough.

In a narrow ravine he almost collided with a bulky form in a mighty hurry, a form whose green-shadowed eyes flamed with a light that came from fear. It was Lotor the young raccoon, born that spring, who had never been known to hurry, but he was hurrying now and there was nothing sportive in his haste, but a definite panic. He was swearing thickly as he went and it is doubtful if he even saw Putoris who flicked aside with a menacing hiss.

Shortly afterward in a rabbit runway, the mink met a ruffianly old buck rat, a catastrophe on legs, gibbering horribly and galloping blindly. He collided with Putoris head on. He was quite insane with terror, that rat, for he was fresh from the claws of death, as could be seen by his sides which were red with gashes. The rat leapt clear and hurled himself into a hole he knew. Putoris, too upset for the moment to kill, sprang wrathfully off at another tangent, every hair on his body erect. Then the sword which hangs low over all the outlawed, suddenly descended.

He was going fast and therefore was only vaguely aware of the sliding shadow he had glimpsed before, flitting above the thickets. When his glance did fling aloft it was too late. His rubbery sidewise bound died in the take-off as the great bird above him banked sharply and shot earthward like a feathered dart.

LIKE Putoris, the goshawk had been feeling the shortage of game in the region. Thanks to his own deadly efficiency panic was ever abroad in the dim ravines among the dunes. The few remaining grouse had left the region and the four-footed life of the thickets rarely crossed the open places of late.

On this day the hawk had been tacking and quartering for three persistent hours above the dunes, yet only a tiny woodmouse had gone to replenish the tense springs of his high-strung organism. As hour after hour found him still unfed his ferocity mounted to a flame within him and caution was banished. To see, in short,

was to strike. His foolhardy attack upon Lotor, the young raccoon, was due to his complete loss of temper, and in the wilds to lose one's temper is an unhealthy thing.

The hawk paid for it a few minutes later by missing an easy stoop at the old buck rat. Whereupon the pirate's brain was lashed to blinding fury. When, but a moment later, Putoris emerged from the tangled thicket where the rat had vanished, the hawk dropped upon his enemy with suddenness and force.

Possibly in the first part of that hurricane descent, the hawk mistook Putoris for the rat. Possibly he was beyond caring, for a hawk that has missed his stoop is many kinds of a demon.

Putoris heard the hiss of the enemy's falling body and his sidewise leap just before the stroke was all that saved him from instant death. As it was one set of the hawk's talons clutched him about the center of his back, cutting into the vitals, and the other closed in a paralyzing grip about his narrow haunches—closed and locked in the fish-hook grip peculiar to all the raptores. Such a grip cannot be loosened for some minutes.

As Putoris twisted his slim sinuous body about to fight for his life, the goshawk keenly regretted his rashness. But there was neither time nor opportunity now to loosen his talons or withdraw from the sortie, which had become a death struggle. The deadly triangular jaws of the mink, aided by his supple neck were already lunging up at him seeking a fatal throat-hold. Instinctively the hawk sought to carry the battle into his own familiar element of the upper air, and flapping heavily he rose from the ground, the mink twisting and battling in his claws.

A DREAD vertigo, as the earth dropped away beneath him, a terror which would completely have cowed a less courageous beast, served only to redouble Putoris' grim ferocity. The hawk met the vicious snappings of the other's grinning jaws with savage blows from his tiger-claw of a beak. The grip of his talons automatically tightened.

The swift, fierce struggle that then ensued was a battle royal, packed with dramatic high-lights, but staged high above the earth. Nothing quite parallels the blind rapacity of either mink or hawk in their respective realms. The vantage which had been with the hawk at the outset was quickly evened by Putoris who, with claws sunk into the enemy's breast, literally began to climb upward toward the hawk's throat, though the effort was an agony to him because of the other's talons deep-bedded in his middle.

Blood now soaked the hawk's breast and tufts of feathers torn out by the jaws of the mink trailed like smoke puffs in the wake of the battle. Again and again the stiletto-like teeth of the mink snapped shut within an inch of the hawk's throat.

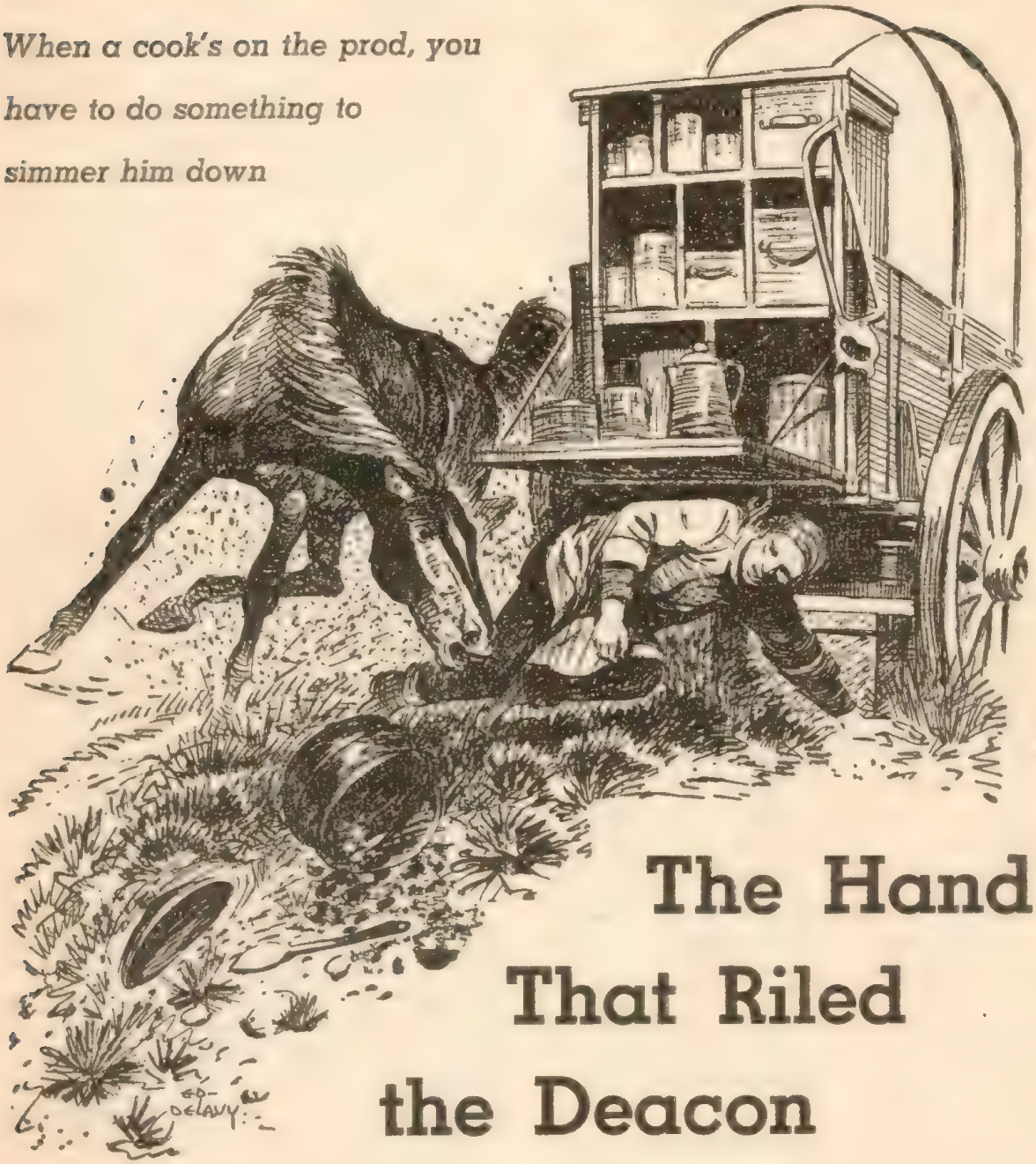
Finally in desperation the great bird left off stabbing with his beak. Sanity seemed to leave him. He began driving upward with powerful thrusts of his wings, mounting higher and higher each second with a mad idea of leaving his deathly freight behind him. As the speed of his wing-beats increased, quite naturally he drew his legs up tighter beneath him. That little leeway was all Putoris needed. His snaky neck thrust upward and his jaws locked in the enemy's throat. The hawk's pinions stiffened suddenly, and next moment both killers locked in a grip like love, went hurtling toward the earth a thousand feet below.

Much later a pair of cottontails finicking under the moon, discovered their grim carcasses among the larch shadows. The word passed swiftly round and that night the surrounding thickets were populous with beady watching eyes. With the morning light the red squirrels noised the news to all the world and soon the undertakers came, the gray jays and certain others who have the final word in every forest drama—even a despot's death.

Read Our Companion Magazine GIANT WESTERN–25c at all Stands!

By GLENN A. CONNOR

When a cook's on the prod, you have to do something to simmer him down



The Hand That Riled the Deacon

BILL COGLAN bent over his Dutch ovens, a scowl on his boiled features. He had reached the point where he hated the kid's guts.

Standing over a hot stove for hours at a time on days that registered 100 in the shade and no shade, was bad enough. The roundup camp now was pitched on a dry, wind-blown flat, where wisps of dust danced under the tent flaps. The deacon had to clap the lids back on fast to keep the dust out of the grub. Damned if he wouldn't crown the first jigger with a skillet that mentioned grit in the grub!

And now to have a no-account young hellion like that Jimmy O'Hara scalli-

wagging to top all of it off.

"I'm gonna kill the damn buzzard next time he pulls any monkeyshines!" vowed the deacon wrathfully.

Only the day before young O'Hara had brought the tent down about the deacon's ears on the hurricane deck of a bucking bangtail. This was the most recent, and lived with him in vivid detail as he glanced at his scattered cooking utensils, some of them dented and battered beyond use. Now on the surface this looked like EZ Bar's loss. But the deacon didn't figure it that way. The loss of the utensils not only made his job harder, but one held the potatoes which he had rolled out an hour earlier than usual, hoping thereby to catch a nap during the heat of the forenoon. Instead he was condemned to the hot stove during the very worst heat of the day.

The deacon had salvaged what he could, but most of the potatoes had been mashed and trampled into the ground. He was sorely tempted to serve them that way, until he reasoned that only O'Hara was to blame in this case. But he was quite aware that the same O'Hara was often aided and abetted in his deviltry by the others, too.

Then there was his bucket of sourdough riser, spreading over the landscape like foam on an undulating sea. This straw almost broke the deacon's back. At sight of it he raised his hands to high heaven but could find no words violent enough to express his feelings. He had staggered over to Sims, who rodded the crew, babbling that he was through and he'd quit, and never had he been in such a nightmare before.

As the deacon reviewed the matter now he was stumped to know how he had let Sims talk him out of it. "Said it wasn't O'Hara's fault!" snorted the deacon, recalling the conversation. "Said when a bangtail come unwound they couldn't be managed. Huh! He don't know the rapscallion like I do! S'pose O'Hara couldn't help it the time I was takin' a nap and he put a gob of axle grease on my finger, and then tickled my nose? S'pose he couldn't help it 'nother time I was takin' a nap and he come tearin' into camp, screamin' the herd was stampedin', and I run my head through the spokes of the chuckwagon?" The deacon made an awful face at the memory, remembering his own agony and the difficulty they had extricating him.

"By golly, it's got to the point where I don't dare shut my eyes!" he raved on. "And damned if I'm gonna cook and not get no rest. I'll tell Sims so. I'm gonna tell him he'll either keep that young turk corralled or he can hustle up another chuck-slinger, that's what I'll tell him!

"And so help me Jehovah, next time O'Hara makes a break, I'm gonna brain him with a skillet!"

Comparatively speaking, the deacon was as touchy as a case of sun-dried, crystallized dynamite; the least jar might set him off. He was keyed to the tautness of an overtight violin string, that just the weight of the bow could snap. Imagine then, the effect at near noon, the deacon at the height of state both in mind and frying body, bent over his Dutch ovens for a final stirring and inspection, the heat and the steam blasting his perspiring red features the like to curl his toes; then Jimmy O'Hara descending the camp with a rattle of hoofs and a shrill, belly-jolting "Yippy-ye-ee-e!"

RECOGNIZING the yell, the deacon only had the more horrible visions of mayhem and disaster. He lunged through the front of his tent, one of the heavy Dutch-oven lids still in his hand, blistering hot, to take shelter under the chuckwagon or to do battle, while his present mood was all in favor of fight.

But the deacon's weapon of defense was poorly chosen as he quickly discovered. The heat from the lid penetrated even the accustomed thick hide of his hand, and he dropped it with a howl and an oath. Then, while sucking at a blister, a horse, minus rider and gear, plunged almost on top of him. Planted hoofs tore the turf and flung dirt like a bursted shrapnel. The deacon reeled back, spit-

ting dirt and more curses. Having swabbed the dirt from his eyes, he could only crouch and glare at the offender.

O'Hara stood on spraddled legs as he had struck the ground from the back of his running horse, saddle in one hand, bridle in the other, all having been peeled simultaneously and while the animal was in motion. Whether it was just a coincidence or whether it was purely purposeful that this action had taken place in close proximity of the chuckwagon and cook tent, only O'Hara and his patron saint could have testified.

In the deacon's mind there was no shadow of a doubt. It was a premeditated act of wilful, wanton violence, in search of his person and his life. Accident! When the same thing had happened time and time again? When O'Hara had searched him out for his specific victim? When he had nearly battered his brains out trying to drive through the hind wheel of the chuckwagon, because O'Hara made him believe the herd was stampeding? When he got a mouthful of that axle grease in slapping at the fly he thought was irritating his nose? He had gagged and heaved the rest of the day! O'Hara's acts not premeditated? Don't make the deacon laugh!

Quite unaware of the deacon's vile mood and his definite conclusions, O'Hara dropped his gear, swept off his hat and made a bow.

"What d'you think of that, Bill? That's the way I'm gonna do this fall at them relay races. Think them fellows'll have a chance again' me? With a little more practice. . . ."

O'Hara's encomium sort of dragged out to just a movement of lips. Looking at the deacon for some sort of applause or praise, he saw the distorted, working features.

"You sick, Bill?"

O'Hara observed the working lips from which no sound issued, the deacon's jaws bobbing up and down and sideways like he was chewing on a cud of tough beef he couldn't swallow. O'Hara wondered, not without sympathy, if the deacon had lost his power of speech. He struggled so hard to say something that O'Hara worked his own mouth in sympathy.

"Now he's mockin' me!" raged the deacon in his mind. He saw a brighter crimson. In its flame rose O'Hara, a pitchfork on his shoulder, sprouting horns. The deacon charged, belching, "Sick as hell! Sick of you! Sick of your everlastin' pesky hazin'! Sick. . . ."

The deacon's lament ended in an exhaustive grunt as he hit the earth a belly-flopper, his nose and his face plowing along the surface of the hard 'dobe. It was a case of two hard surfaces coming together, but the 'dobe won out. The deacon lost more skin than he picked up dust.

O'Hara hadn't laid a hand on him. To avoid the charge he had just dropped to hands and knees. Charging with his eyes shut, the deacon had merely stumbled over O'Hara.

"Now, Bill!" protested Jimmy straightening up.

The deacon rolled to his feet and barreled forward, cutting O'Hara's expostulation short. He swung a haymaker that O'Hara merely ducked, but whose violence carried the deacon against the chuckwagon with a crash that again almost knocked him out. He whirled blindly, charging again, became entangled in the harness hanging on the neckyoke jamb in the front wheel of the chuckwagon. He bellowed like a snagged bull, thrashing this way and that, flailing with his arms until his eye came into violent contact with the end of the neckyoke. The deacon clapped a sudden hand to the injured orb.

"Strike a man when he's down, will you!" he howled, lashing out with his free hand which came in contact with the iron rim of the wheel, and howled again.

"For the love of Pete, Bill, you gone plumb loco?" yelled O'Hara, ten feet away. He maneuvered in, evading the thrashing arms and legs, and managed to get the deacon untangled from the harness. Getting his shoulder in the small of the deacon's back, O'Hara brought him to his feet with a heave.

The deacon opened his one good eye to see O'Hara stepping away. He rushed forthwith back into the fight. But it was like an elephant fighting a gadfly. O'Hara merely ducked or side-stepped, maneuvering now to keep him out in the open, and wondering all the time what the hell had come over the deacon!

Such was the scene that Ed Sims and the other EZ Bar waddies rode upon.

"Looks like Jimmy and the deacon is playin' a game of tag, with the deacon 'it'," remarked one ramrod, a puzzled frown on his face.

"Never saw the deacon in such a playful mood," said another.

"Try to kill me, will you!" bellowed the deacon.

SIMS set spurs to his horse, and O'Hara put the horse between him and the deacon. The deacon tried to plow right straight through, almost unseating Sims as he began belting Sims' horse. Indignant at the unwarranted attack, the animal swapped ends and lashed out with both rear heels, narrowly missing the deacon's head. Sims piled off and grabbed the deacon by the shoulders, sliding his hold down about the deacon's flailing arms.

"What'n hell is goin' on here?" he demanded, holding hard to the deacon but fastening an accusing glance on O'Hara.

O'Hara started forward impulsively. "That's what I wish you'd tell me, Ed! I'd just rode into camp when—"

"Keep him back if you don't want me to kill him!" yelled the deacon. "He just now tried to kill me! He's been tryin' to ever since the wagons started out!"

"I never touched him!" denied O'Hara.

"Never touched me! *Never touched me!*" The deacon rolled his one good eye beseechingly at the ramrod. "Look at me, Sims. And he says he never touched me. Look at my eye. . . ."

"He bumped it against the neckyoke. He got all tangled up in the harness."

"Look at my hand. . . ."

"He hit it against the wagon wheel, thinkin'—"

"Lookit my face!"

"He did that stumblin' over me. Honest t'gosh, Ed, I never laid a hand on Bill. He did it all hisself!"

"He's a damn liar!" roared the deacon, trying to break loose from the ramrod's restraining hold.

"Cool down!" ordered Sims. He twisted the deacon around so that he could look him over.

Sims was adept at reading sign. He saw no bruises on him that might have been put there by a fist. But how the deacon had self-inflicted all this punishment on himself was hard to understand. Maybe O'Hara's explanation was plausible, but sure as hell something had happened to set the deacon off!

Sims looked up, caught his riders' convulsed faces, and shook his head warningly. He directed his attention to O'Hara, who was screwing his boot heel down into the 'dobe with nervous uncertainty.

"Just what did you do, Jimmy?"

"Why, I—I just rode into camp—"

"Hah! Just rode into camp, did he?" The deacon glared at him balefully. "His damn horse almost run over me!"

"I wasn't on him," defended O'Hara. "And you came rushin' out and—"

"All right, all right," interrupted Sims, realizing this was going to get him nowhere.

Sims was a tolerant man. But being wagon-boss of the EZ Bar had its responsibilities. He had overlooked O'Hara's horseplay largely because of his youth and exuberant spirits. Sims believed in the precept "a mischievous boy, a good man." But there were other valuable considerations.

Some people just have a natural gift for handling horses. O'Hara had that gift. He not only understood horses, but they seemed to understand him. He rode the EZ Bar's rough string, and that was no cinch to handle. It was made up of spoiled and bad horses, outlaws and sleepy-eyed dynamite, hammer-head meanness and wall-eyed treachery. They would have cracked an older man's nerve. O'Hara apparently thrived on the hazards.

But excluding the ramrod, the cook is the most valued and the most valuable member of a roundup crew. A full and satisfied belly is a necessary adjunct to long hours in the saddle. The cook is king of his castle even if it is only a stained and weathered piece of canvas, and his word is law in his own domain. To keep the inner man appeased and satisfied, this lord of the kitchen must be kowtowed to, and no one knew it better than Sims. Best, he thought, to have a talk with the deacon first.

The deacon had somewhat recovered his equilibrium, but he would not relent one teensy bit. He made it plain to Sims that the EZ Bar cow-camp was not big enough for him and O'Hara both. The only alternative was that O'Hara must go or he, the deacon, would.

Sims tried argument. He pointed out that if O'Hara left, no one remained who could handle the EZ Bar rough-string.

"They got to be rode out, Bill, and no one can do it quite like Jimmy. He's bringin' 'em to time," he added hastily, as he saw the deacon about to explode. "Why, by the time this roundup is over Jimmy is going to have most of 'em so the boss's kid can ride 'em."

"Him or me!" stated the deacon discouragingly.

"Then Jimmy's important in other ways," went on Sims. "He's got the artistic touch with a stamping iron. He knows just the right color of buckskin to make a brand permanent and don't peel sores."

"O'Hara goes or I do!" repeated the deacon.

"I know Jimmy is aggravatin' sometimes—"

"Aggravatin', is it? He's a cockeyed renegade!"

"Now I'll have a talk with Jimmy. I'll hobble him, Bill," promised Sims.

The deacon was adamant. "Then I'll start rollin' my bed!"

ED SIMS gave it up with a heavy sigh. "All right, Bill. You don't leave me any alternative but to get rid of Jimmy." He paused at the tent opening and glanced back, surprised a look of savage satisfaction on the deacon's face. "I'll send him on his way soon as he eats," he said, hurrying away.

"Riders come and riders go," gloomed Ed Sims, "but a real grub-mixer on the range ain't to be dispensed with." His searching gaze lit on O'Hara leaning against the bed-wagon, while the EZ Bar riders pounded him with questions. His usual laughing face was not in evidence. Sims remarked it as solemn and puzzled.

He called O'Hara to one side. Back of his somber and stern manner his eyes twinkled. Hell, he couldn't understand how the deacon could take such a dislike to O'Hara!

"Well, I reckon you put your foot into it this time, shaver," he said seriously. "Why in hell don't you lay off the deacon?"

"Why dammit, Ed, I ain't done him no hurt! What's he blowed up about, anyway?"

"You been ridin' him to death, kid. The deacon's finally got his belly full of you. You know as well as I do what it means. The deacon's swore to quit unless I get rid of you. I can't let him go, Jimmy, you know that."

O'Hara's face paled. To the best of his understanding it meant he was fired. Fired over the deacon's tantrum! Hell, Sims couldn't do that to him. O'Hara's eyes pleaded with him.

"Don't you reckon after he cools off, Ed, he'll—ah—forget about it? I promise to lay off him from now on. Gosh, it was all in fun."

Sims shook his head. "The deacon's got his foot down and his dander up. It ain't what you done today, which just sort of set off the explosion, but the accumulation of wrongs he thinks you done him over a period of time."

"Then I take it I'm fired?"

"Worse'n that, shaver." Sims grinned for the first time. "Lookin' at it from the deacon's point of view, you need punishin'. On the other hand me nor the EZ Bar has got any notion of gettin' shed of you. It's Number One line-camp for you,

Jimmy. Catch up your two gentlest and pack your bed. You're pullin' out soon as you eat."

Sims had raised O'Hara's hopes only to pitch him into a pit of gloom. Number One line-camp! Isolated in a God-forsaken country where he might not see a human face for weeks. Where not even a tree grew nor a rock protruded to break the monotony of the gray landscape. Where there wasn't a ranch within forty miles.

When Sims mentioned punishment, he wasn't fooling.

Usually a hearty eater, O'Hara had no appetite after he sat down with his loaded plate. Sims observed him and swore under his breath. What, he wondered, would it take to make the deacon relent?

O'Hara finally set his plate aside scarcely touched, and got to his feet, heading for the cavvy pen. He swung around suddenly, picked up the plate and his cup, cast their contents out, and turned determinedly toward the cook-tent. The deacon looked up at him with a stony stare. O'Hara set his dishes down and faced the deacon.

"Bill," he began, "I'm damn awful sorry. I swear I won't ever aggravate you again. Give me a break, won't you? Tell Ed he don't have to send me to Number One line camp on your account."

"I'll see you in hell first. Now get out of here!" roared the deacon.

O'Hara went. He passed around the circle of eating waddies without looking to right or left. Sims gave him a hard look. O'Hara hurried past him, head down, and missed Sims' broadening grin. O'Hara in this character was really something to see, humbled and subdued, with something almost desperate about him. Sims laid aside his plate and followed.

O'Hara ran out a loop and made his cast. It settled neatly and accurately around the neck of a crop-eared sorrel. He reared and struck, and bared his teeth. Sims' hand gripped his arm.

"I said your two gentlest, Jimmy. Remember?"

O'Hara looked around, giving the ramrod a hot, resentful look. "Why are you so concerned all of a sudden?"

"Well, for one thing, when Crop-ears kills you, I want witnesses present," said Sims grimly. "You're goin' to be over at Number One all by your lonesome."

"He ain't killed me yet."

"Nope. That only happens once. If you lead him out of the corral, I'll shoot him."

Sims' quiet tone was convincing. O'Hara slipped his noose from about the sorrel's neck.

"Who'll ride the rough string now?" O'Hara asked, as he ran out his loop for a gentler mount, and Sims standing by to see that he did. The ramrod waited until O'Hara's loop settled over the head of a chunky bay.

"Oh, I'll split 'em up among the boys," he answered carelessly and walked away.

IT WAS well that he did. O'Hara glared after him, eyes hot with indignation and resentment. He knew and loved the nature of every individual animal in his string. That may be how he managed them so famously. To love a horse is to resent another riding it. Wisely Sims moved away before O'Hara could uncork his indignation.

"It's tough enough havin' somebody else ridin' your string," muttered O'Hara, "but to have my string cut up and ridden by every Tom, Dick and Harry—" He swallowed furiously.

Sims was far from reconciled over sending O'Hara to Number One line-camp, despite his orders to O'Hara. But how to bring the deacon to terms was the problem that confronted him and still had him beat. Mulling over the matter, he concluded that whatever scheme he might hatch had to be strong medicine to bring the deacon around.

Then as he was walking away from O'Hara he got an idea that was nothing short of inspiration.

Inspirations are sometimes treacherous ellipses of the mind. Sims caught himself thinking the idea was too filled with risks, and at first discarded it. But as the idea persisted, he came to the conclusion that it was just made to order. He could cut

the hazards down, he figured, by taking proper precautions. Well, he would do that. Now how to get his two principal characters to play their parts without telling them anything about it?

The rest of the EZ Bar waddies had finished wolfing their dinner and were heading for the cavvy. Seeing Perk Cameron and Buzz Rawlins, two of his herd-cutters, Sims beckoned them over to him.

"You fellows remember that buckskin steer we picked up in the gather this morning?"

"You mean the proddy one that put you back on your hoss?" grinned Cameron, who had been on circle with Sims at the time.

"The same. That's what made me think of him," said Sims. "I want you two to cut him out of the herd and haze him over here toward camp. If you chouse him around and get his dander up, so much the better. Leave the rest of the crew over there to hold herd until you get back."

"Uh-huh." Cameron looked Sims over hard. "Just what you up to, Ed?"

"That," chuckled Sims, winking, "is a deep, dark secret. But I'll tell you this much. You've heard me warn the deacon time and time again about pickin' up cow chips for his stove when there was cattle about, or some day he was goin' to get his pants hooked off."

"Bill always scoffed the idea," said Rawlins. "Claimed no damn critter could run him away from his work." They both grinned as they began to see light.

Sims nodded. "Well, I'm goin' to teach the deacon a lesson," he said, and added to himself, "And if things break right as I hope they will, I'm goin' to prove to him that he's all wrong about Jimmy O'Hara."

Perk Cameron considered, lost his grin, and shook his head dubiously. "That buckskin steer now . . . Ed, don't you think you're takin a pretty big chance? I ain't never backed down yet from helpin' to rib a jobbin'. But it just strikes me that buckskin steer is bad medicine. Just the way he put you back in the saddle this mornin' and then tried to horn your hoss, I'd say he's got a touch of loco. Maybe we better use some other one."

"Might not get any reaction, Perk. And I want action. I'll stay here in camp, and I'll have my thirty-thirty handy in case of a slip up. Bring on the buckskin."

"Okay, Ed, you're the boss," agreed Cameron. "One woolly buckskin steer comin' up. Let's go, Buzz."

Sims waited until the crew was riding away and then turned toward the cook tent. O'Hara, he saw, had caught up his second horse and was leading him over to the bed-wagon to pack his bedroll.

"I want to see you again, Jimmy, before you pull out," said Sims. "Be with you in a jerk." He stuck his head in the doorway of the tent. "Bill, let your dishes go for the present. I'm movin' the herd over here on the flat for workin', so you better shake a leg out there and gather up some dry chips before they get all mussed up."

He withdrew his head before the deacon had time to answer. But the deacon was so well pleased with the way things were going, so relieved that O'Hara would no longer be around to rasp his nerves raw, that he jumped to his feet with alacrity, snatched a couple of empty burlap bags from behind the stove and took out.

"Wanted to give you some orders, shaver, so you wouldn't think you were goin' over there on a vacation," explained Sims.

O'Hara gave him a bitter look. "Number One line-camp ain't my idea of a vacation, orders or no orders."

"Oh, hell, now, Jimmy, you shouldn't take it like that. Buzz left some mighty good readin' matter over there."

"The devil with readin'. I got no time for it."

"You will have." The ramrod took a careless look around. The crew had already disappeared over the swell. The deacon was still heading out across the flat, about two hundred yards off.

HIS bedroll arranged, O'Hara picked it up and slapped it on the back of his pack-horse. While he was engaged in putting on the squaw hitch, Sims ran

his hand under the canvas sheet of the bed-wagon for his rifle.

When his fingers at first did not come in contact with the gun, Sims thought nothing of it. But as he felt further and still did not strike the weapon, he raised the cover for a look-see. No rifle was there. And then, with a quick catch of breath, he remembered.

Bower had borrowed the gun that morning, hoping to get a shot at a wolf he had seen the day before. Bower was over at the herd now. So was his rifle!

Sims lifted his head. He heard a shout. Whirling around, he saw the buckskin steer burst into sight over the swell. The steer ran zig-zag, shaking his head from side to side. Once he stopped and looked back, then took off down the slope on a gallop. Cameron and Rawlins popped into view and reined up, slouching in their saddles, waiting to take in the show.

Sims' attention pulled back to the deacon who was crouching over, gathering chips. He measured the steer's course. If the buckskin didn't change, he would pass the deacon some distance to the west. If the deacon held still, the steer might pass him unnoticed.

But a man can't pick up cow-chips and stay put in one spot. Nor had the steer any intention of maintaining his present gait. Finding he was no longer pursued, he slowed to a trot, then to a walk, finally stopped altogether. His head jerked erect at sight of the roundup camp. The deacon was working back toward the camp, and his movements next attracted the steer's attention.

"Hell's bells!" ripped out Sims, and started running, yelling to attract the deacon's attention. For, with a shake of his head, the steer started running again, in the direction of the deacon!

O'Hara looked up, attracted by the ramrod's yells, saw the deacon out on the flat, Sims running toward him and waving. Then suddenly Sims stopped and yelled something back at O'Hara. O'Hara couldn't hear what it was, but at the same time he caught sight of the buckskin steer, loping in the deacon's direction.

Finally attracted by the yells, the deacon rose to his feet. Fifty feet away the buckskin steer came to a stop. He and the deacon stood and stared at each other. The deacon said, "Whoof!" and stepped forward waving his arms. The buckskin steer snorted, lowered his head and pawed the dirt. At this the deacon stopped and lowered his hands in doubt. The steer looked at him again, a slant-eyed stare, and the deacon turned and took to his heels, fast as his fat legs could carry him.

But the deacon was fat and heavy and short on wind, from much bending over hot stoves. Seeing his enemy fleeing before him, the buckskin snorted again, tossed his wicked horns, and lumbered in pursuit. The deacon cast a horrified look back over his shoulder, pumped his fat legs into greater effort, and opened his mouth. The sound that started from it sounded like a foghorn and ended in the screech of a fire siren.

Realizing how helpless he was to do anything about it, Sims stood frozen in his tracks. Suspecting that something had gone wrong, after seeing the ramrod out there without his rifle, Cameron and Rawlins had spurred into life and rode hell-bent, knowing they could never get there in time.

One instant O'Hara saw humor in the situation, the next saw him leap for his saddle. His mount had bunched himself as he saw O'Hara coming, and was off like a shot as he hit the saddle. O'Hara felt for his rope, felt the dangling strap, and remembered he had used it to squaw-hitch his pack.

When O'Hara reached the steer, the animal was so close that his hot breath burned the deacon's back. O'Hara did not dare try to bend the steer aside for fear of riding over the deacon. In this crisis his mind worked like lightning. Whirling his mount parallel, he dived headlong for the gleaming horns. His hands wrapped about them like a steel vise, his lithe body swung in an arc, suspended in the air. Then his feet struck the ground, the high heels of his boots digging into the turf, plowing furrows.

The course of the charging steer was slightly diverted. The two of them swept past the deacon like the tide of a mill-race. Utterly winded, his legs caved from under him, the deacon flopped to the ground.

Gradually the digging boot heels slowed the steer down. O'Hara quickly shifted his grip. He passed an arm under the horn nearest him and gripped the other horn with both hands. He wrapped a leg about the steer's nose and braced himself with the other. He knew his respite was to be brief. If the steer started fighting before he was set, he was apt to find himself on the point of those sharp horns.

The infuriated steer plunged anew, the near horn swept upward, ripping O'Hara's shirt from the waistband of his levis to his shoulder. Crimson stained the rent but the waddy didn't feel the injury, just a sudden numbness. He clung like grim death, throwing all his weight downward, twisting, twisting, forcing the steer's nose in the opposite direction, bringing the near horn nearer and nearer to his own vitals; a hundred-and-fifty-pound youth twisting down a thousand-pound steer!

Cameron and Rawlins tore up, their ropes ready, but there was nothing they could do while O'Hara was wrapped about the steer's head and the steer's heels braced hard upon the ground. Sims arrived on foot, yelling encouragement.

"Stay with him, Jimmy! *Stay with him.*"

"If you can cut loose now—" began Cameron uncertainly, as he dangled his loop to keep it open.

"No!" bellowed Sims. "If he lets loose now he'll be gored sure as hell! Stay right with him, Jimmy!" insisted the ramrod, hopping about looking for a way to aid him.

But O'Hara was deaf alike to advice and encouragement. Sweat dripped off his face. Blood pounded deafeningly in his head with the strain of his exertion. Blackness descended before his eyes. He felt his muscles going numb from the effort he put upon them.

Then, after what seemed a lifetime to O'Hara, he felt the steer relaxing. Flexed muscles, ten times harder than his own, commenced to give. Sims shouted new encouragement as he noticed the steer's knees buckling. The steer toppled over with a thud; O'Hara lay between its wicked horns.

There followed some fast work on the part of Cameron and Rawlins. Their ropes were anchored to front feet and hind, and they stretched the steer out helpless. It took some effort on Sims' part to loosen O'Hara's grip on the horns. His eyes were still shut with effort, beads of sweat dripping off his face.

Then the deacon came to life. He stumbled forward, caught O'Hara by the shoulders and dragged him out from under the steer while Sims held its head up. He lifted O'Hara to his feet, then embraced him in a bearlike hug.

"Rampagin' damn hellion! No sense a-tall! All the time a-raisin' hell and gettin' your foot in it! But you and me, kid, is pards from here on. Ol' Bill Coglan can forget an injury, but he don't never forget a favor!"

O'Hara twisted loose and stared at him. "I wish I could believe that," he muttered. "If you mean it, Bill, then tell Ed not to send me to Number One line-camp."

"Tell 'im?" roared the deacon. "You damn betcha I'll tell 'im!" And he reared around on Sims, who was mopping his own wet face. "Listen, you. If you want to hire another cook, just you send O'Hara away! I mean it, Sims, by damn, I do!"

Sims waved a hand in acknowledgment and turned his face away. He drew a deep breath.

"Well, that's that," he thought. "But never again will I pull *that* stunt!"

Remember—THE VALLEY OF THE UNDEAD by T. W. Ford—Next Issue!

SILVER MOUNTAIN

a novelet by STEUART EMERY

CHAPTER I

Just a Teeny Canary

THE blazing desert sunshine pouring through the window fell in a flood upon "Blaster" Breen, ace dynamite man at the Silver Princess Mine. It was hardly more blazing than the red flannel shirt which clothed the upper part of Blaster's recumbent form, the shirt in which he had gone to bed. The larger half of an oversize steak sandwich was clutched to his

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chest with one hand while the other, dangling floorward, brushed an empty bottle of the Mesquite Saloon's best tanglefoot.

Over Blaster's chest spread his wide orange-red beard, and his head was thatched deep with a similar fiery mop. He was a vast, rollicking hellion of a hard-rock man, huge-boned and huge-muscled, and in repose he was neither beautiful nor quiet. A grinding sawmill noise emerged from him steadily. Outside the window of the pine-walled room in the hotel the noises of Continental Street, Eureka's widest and toughest artery, went on but Blaster Breen remained dead to the world.

There was a flutter in the frame of the open window beside the bed and something feathered and yellow landed on the sill. It opened its tiny beak and the thin trilling of a canary filled the room. Blaster stirred. "G'way!" he muttered vaguely. "Take them mine whistles away!"

The canary ceased its song, bright eyes bright eyes and gently began to hop toward Blaster Breen's widespread beard in which nestled a multitude of crumbs.

It began to pick them off, the smallest ones first. Presently a larger and more succulent crumb attracted, and the little ball of fluff almost disappeared in the orange-red bush.

BLASTER BREEN suddenly opened one eye, then both, staring foggily at the ceiling. His gaze lowered, and a look of utter horror dawned on his crimson face. Eye to eye at a distance of six inches he and the canary stared at each other. Every muscle in Blaster Breen's huge frame stiffened.

"Yellow buzzard!" he gasped. "A gigantic yellow buzzard is sinkin' its beak in my corpse! I have died in my sleep!" The canary startled, hopped back again to the sandwich. "Now it's trampin' my chest in!" bellowed Blaster. "Stavin' my ribs!"

Blaster Breen, dynamiter, and Hippolyte Petitpois, barber, share a close shave in unmasking outlaws!

At the noise the canary took wing and came to rest on the back of a chair on which was draped a pair of corduroy pants with big-buckled suspenders. It opened its beak and began to trill again.

cocked at the bed directly beneath it. It launched itself forward and landed on Blaster Breen's chest, next the sandwich in his hand. Cautiously it waited, and as no move came from Blaster it grew bolder and pecked at the bread.

The bread, somewhat adamant as was the habit of Eureka's bakery products, appeared too big to break up under the tiny beak. Again the canary cocked its

Blaster Breen flung himself to the floor, landing practically upright, and dived for the opposite window that gave onto Continental Street. His eyes were wild, his crumb-spattered beard wilder.

"I shall dive out the window to safety!" he panted. "This time it is a yellow buzzard instead of a red-white-and-blue turkey with a straw hat on. It is the tremens."

Holding the gleaming sword, Hippolyte stood facing the four bearded men

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Half-way to the window his eyes came into proper focus, and he blinked. The unwarranted motions of his limbs ceased and he brushed a hairy hand across a brow wet with perspiration.

"It is not a gigantic yellow buzzard," he announced. "It is a small canary. Blaster Breen, you what have lived the fearsome life of minin' town and desert are the equal of any canary that ever pounced upon a man's chest. You little rascal, you!" He shook his finger rebukingly at the bird. "How in heck did you get in here? Answer me that, canary!"

There was no answer from the canary, but a light tap sounded on the door and Blaster jerked around.

"That is too gentle for the mighty hand of the law, or for an angry creditor," he mused. "Who is it?"

The light tap sounded again.

"Excuse me, pleeze, but ees my canary in zere?" asked a high voice.

"It be a lady's voice! And I am as pantless as Adam!"

A lady in the hotel! Frantically Blaster dived for the chair and crammed himself into his corduroys.

"Come in," he called. "Come in, ma'am."

The eyes of Blaster Breen started from his head. Across the threshold of his room stepped the most dapper, diminutive figure he had ever seen. A tight-waisted lavender frock coat with a skirt that flared like a sail, clothed it. Glistening patent leather shoes with pointed toes encased its feet, while a beautiful silk tile perched atop the head.

Merry, sparkling eyes smiled friendlily at Blaster. A handlebar mustache, raven black and gloriously waxed, curved in twin arcs up in front of round and rosy cheeks. The aroma of eau de cologne filled the room like a scented breeze.

"*Bon jour, mon ami,*" rose the cheery salutation. The visitor executed a drawing room bow, heels together, and body snapping like a jack-knife. "Eet ees that I do not disturb, I 'ope. I perceive my leetle bird."

"I'll be a cryin' cougar!" breathed Blaster. The desert has rained frogs! It is a Frenchman!"

"A Frenchman, *oui!*" The caller drew himself up to his full height of five-feet-two, lifting the tile. "A ceetizen of la Belle France come to make hees fortune on ze American frontier. Permit me, monsieur."

From his breast pocket he drew a card and Blaster took the pasteboard gingerly. Its ornate engraving read:

HIPPOLYTE PETITPOIS
Artist Tonsorial
Beard Styling and Care
A Specialty
Late of Paris and
Philadelphia

Blaster's chest under its mat of orange-red hair, revealed by his open shirt, heaved slightly.

"I am Blaster Breen," he got out. "The dynamiter."

The canary gave vent to a cheerful twitter and came fluttering from the chair back to perch on its owner's shoulder.

"Naughtee, Clothilde!" said Hippolyte. "But papa forgives! Clothilde ees a friendly leetle bird, Monsieur Blastaire Breen, wiz ze bad habit of flying out ze window when I take her from her cage. But she does not evaire fly far."

The canary burst into a joyous trilling. Hippolyte lifted it from his shoulder and put it on the rickety stand near by. Deftly he plopped his silk hat over it.

"Zat ees enough of your disturbance of Monsieur Blastaire. *Taisez-vous.* Ze dark for you, Clothilde."

THE trilling ceased as night fell in the improvised silken cage. Blaster handed the card back.

"I am pleased to welcome you to Eureka, Mussoo Pettipwah," he gulped. "You've come to seek your fortune? You're followin' the silver rush?"

"I follow ze beards," said Hippolyte. "Ze glorious beard rush! *Mon ami,* permit me to say zat you 'ave ze most *magnifique* red beard zat Hippolyte Petitpois, artist tonsorial, 'as evair viewed! Eet ees ze beard of Charlemagne, of ze great Bar-

barossa! Zere is pay ore in ze beard like zat, zere is pay ore in ze host of beards in Eureka for Hippolyte!"

"Well, now, I have got a pretty good beard," admitted Blaster, with becoming modesty. "But as for yore gettin' the trade of Eureka, that's somethin' else."

"In Paris ze high class artist tonsorial beezness eet deteriorate." A shade of sadness overspread Hippolyte's mercurial face. "Eeet is years since ze Empire of Napoleon ze Third fell. Ze *bourgeois* under ze *Republique* zey care nossing for ze elaborate styles of ze Imperial court and ze loving beard care and ze twice daily shaving. So Hippolyte is voyage to Philadelphia and in Philadelphia eet ees unsympathetic beezness also.

"And zen in your *Harpair's Weekly* I see ze peectures of ze mining rushes, ze boom-boom towns wiz t'ousands of ze miners wiz no shaves, no loving beard care. 'Zese,' says I to Hippolyte, 'is ze virgin territory.'

"Be'old, I arrive last afternoon and already I have bought ze just-vacant store three doors from ze post office in ze superb location and I have install' my feextures. Zere is ze fortune for Hippolyte at ze dollaire a beard, shave or trim, a dollaire ze shampoo, ze higher rates for ze special beard styling, and ze bathtub in ze back of ze shop."

"Our last two barbers didn't do so good, Mussoo Hippo," said Blaster. "The first of 'em went bankrupt for lack of customers."

"I shall advertise myself. *A bas* ze expense!"

"And the other he fled the town with a miner he nicked on the chin in hot pursuit, firin' at his heels."

"Hippolyte Petitpois has nevair nicked a customer on ze chin! Also, I, former Lieutenant Hippolyte Petitpois of ze Eighth Imperial Hussars in ze Franco-Prussian War, can defend myself. Look!"

He swept back the sail-like skirt, disclosing a tooled leather sheath with a thin-bladed dagger in it.

"Ze steel! *L'arme blanche. Voyez vouis,* I was at one time assistant to my elder brozzaire, Hyacinthe, ze greatest *maitre d'armes* in Paree. I can fence and thrust wiz zees like a rapier. I can also fight wiz ze saber as I did in ze Franco-Prussian war. Zis ees a fighting town? Very well, Hippolyte can fight w'en necessaire."

"Mussoo Hippo," said Blaster, "I foresee an interestin' career for you."

"And your career, Monsieur Blastaire? You are ze prospector, ze desert rat? You pursue ze silvair in ze ground where she ees for ze year after weary year?"

"I don't pursue no silver for year after weary year, wearin' out my boots and the best part of my life on no desert. I am goin' to let my silver strike find me like it has plenty of others. Silver is where you least expect it, Mussoo Hippo. A man gets himself drunk and stumbles and hits his head on a rock, and when he comes to he finds the rock is rich with free silver.

"A mule's trace can expose it on a trail, and has. Folks have found it diggin' an outhouse in their back yard or scoopin' out a shaller grave for their mother-in-law. No, sir, Blaster Breen is no Mahomet. He's goin' to make his silver mountain come to him. And latterly, Hippo,"—Blaster's eyes glinted—"I have been feelin' luckier and luckier."

"*Bon!* And in ze meantime while you wait, Monsieur Blastaire, for your lucky strike?"

"I am a dynamiter, like I said, up to the Silver Princess Mine. It is high-paid work and steady work too. I am a expert dynamiter, Hippo," added Blaster with proper pride. "I can bring you down a whole ore chamber roof with my explosive, or I can fix it to bring down a few pounds light as feathers. I can put out a lighted match at ten paces and not hurt the match stick, if I feel like it."

"Superb, *mon ami* Blastaire!" exclaimed Hippolyte. "And now I go to my shop, ze *Maison* Petitpois. I plan ze grand opening for today. Zis formal garb, in which I parade ze boulevards of Paris, I save for ze occasion."

"I had better go with you, Hippo." Blaster surveyed the lavender-clad, silk-hatted glory of the strange Parisian figure. "This is a rough jokin' town. I am

well-known and I'll pertect you. I'll take you for my little pardner, and whoever touches you, touches me. Wait, and I'll strap my gun on."

"Good, *mon camarade.* I put Clothilde back in her cage. Zen we parade ze boulevards of Eureka togezzaire."

CHAPTER II

The Chaparral Boys

BLASTER and Hippolyte walked downstairs through a stunned lobby and out into the brassy sunlight and alkali dust of Continental Street, running in a double rank of frame and adobe structures, with the barren mass of the silver range bulking hugely hardly a quarter of a mile from the buildings. The gusty life of a Frontier boom town roistered along the boardwalks, and ore wagons, spring carts, and freighters jumbled the street. An endless bedlam of voices hailed fellow townsmen or cursed at balky mules.

On the wooden sidewalk they marched along, the hulking figure of Blaster Breen looming over Hippolyte like a protective battleship. The lavender chest of Hippolyte Petitpois was distended with pride, he twirled his glistening handlebars with an air, the silk hat rode cockily on his head. The first roar of incredulity broke from a burly, plaid-shirted miner, and was echoed immediately.

"My goshamighty, what is it? Animal, mineral or vegetable?"

"Shoot it, Blaster, and stuff it!"

Flourishingly, Hippolyte doffed his silk hat.

"My fren's!" he caroled. "I sank you for ze welcome! Ah, but ze Frontier eet ees 'ospitable! I shall reciprocate!"

The crowd roiling along the arcades parted in amazement and the progress of Blaster and Hippolyte was triumphal, albeit accompanied by a steady chorus of owlhoots, catcalls, and Apache yells. Weathered faces were agape with grins, eyes bulged out under brows, mouths dropped open and then emitted raucous sound.

"Mussoo Hippo," said Blaster soberly, "you're knockin' 'em cold!"

A rapt look came into Hippolyte's cherubic face.

"Ze beards, ze glorious beards!" he murmured, as though fascinated. "Ze street eet ees flooded wiz zem. Wave upon wave like ze mighty sea of hair. Look *camarade,* ze mos' superb of all—four beards abreast marching upon us! Zey 'ave ze hair of ze hermit prophets!"

Blaster looked ahead. There was a clear space under the arcades for some twenty or thirty yards, and down it in a line that stretched from sidewalk edge to storefront stalked a quartet of figures side by side. They ranged in their alinement of height from short and fattish, medium and spare, up to the tall, big-shouldered man on the inside.

They were strangely and funereally alike in their low-crowned black hats, tightly buttoned black single-breasted jackets, and heavy, knee-high black boots that seemed some kind of uniform. From under the flat hats their faces stared, all of the same pattern in the vast bushy growth that burgeoned from their chins and ran over their mouths, up the sides of their faces to mingle with flowing, unkempt locks.

They had wild black hair through which eyes gleamed and faces were austere masks. Gun-belts weighted their hips, fastened outside their jackets.

"The Chaparral Boys in person!" gurgled Blaster. "Never have I seen no getup like that. They are walkin' thickets of assorted ages and sizes. Huh, Hippo?"

Hippolyte had plucked him by the arm, halting him.

"Be'old, my *salon,* Blastaire."

He darted across the sidewalk to the plate glass storefront. Through the pane the long mirror was revealed, the gleaming white enamel and metal barber's chair rose before it. Shaving mugs, brushes, lotions, decorated the shelf beneath the mirror, crisp white towels hung on a rack.

"Ees it not beautiful—ees it not *magnifigue?*" sang Hippolyte. "Ees it not—"

His chant of joy broke off. A rough shoulder crashed into him and knocked him off balance, a strong arm shoved brutally, and Hippolyte went over onto his back in the doorway.

"Ho, ho, ho!" came the snarl of laughter, and the line of black-clad and bearded men swept past. It was as though they had gone over Hippolyte in a wave.

"Hey, you!" roared Blaster. "Pick on somebody your own size."

THE four bearded faces turned as the somber men marched on in their odd formation. There was a vicious glint in the slate-gray eyes of the biggest man, the one who had deliberately jostled and knocked down the Frenchman.

"Come back here and I shall punch your jaw for you! I'll plunge my right arm up to the elbow in that chin hair of yours!"

"Bah!" snarled the tall man, and the quartet marched on, high boots thumping in perfect step.

Blaster's great fists bunched and his eyes glared fury. He stepped swiftly across the planking and swung Hippolyte to his feet, beating the dust off the sail-like skirts of his lavender coat. Hippolyte Petitpois' eyes also flared, furious bubbling emerged from him.

"Sacré cochon! Sale maquereau! Nom d'un nom d'un nom, quel sauvage!"

"Keep it up," urged Blaster admiringly. "I don't know what you're termin' that big bully, but I'll back you to the limit, little pardner."

"I 'ave been insult! Mortally insult! I shall challenge!"

"He would eat you up, Hippo," said Blaster. "I'll attend to him the next time I see him, and to the rest of them Chaparral Boys. Maybe he was just playin' a rough Frontier joke on you, knockin' you down like that."

Blaster Breen's desert-red forehead tied into the knots of thought as he ruminated.

"No, Hippo," he finally said, "somethin' tells me he done it deliberate and for some reason I can't figure out. I do my figurin' better on a couple shots of red-eye, and the best figurin' place in town is right across the street. Mesquite Saloon, we greet you!"

Swaggering in good fellowship, Blaster grabbed Hippolyte Petitpois by the arm and rushed him over the sand. The batwing doors of the Mesquite swung violently open, and he pulled up short in front of the crowded room.

"Gentlemen and others!" be bellowed. "Meet Mussoo Hippolyte Pettypwah of Paree and points west! Hippo, old *ami,* take your bow!"

From faro, roulette and poker tables, and from the long, packed bar the Mesquite's customers stared at the diminutive resplendence of Hippolyte Pettitpois. Every gaze in the place was focused on him. His hand went to the inside of his lavender frock coat and came out with a fat wallet. His fingers dipped into the wallet and a banknote rose on high. So did Hippolyte's voice in a clarion call.

"*Mes amis* of Eureka! 'Ere is ze 'undred-dollaire bill! To ze bar, all 'ands! Ze drinks zey are on Hippolyte Petitpois!"

Roaring, the crowd surged forward. Shouts of thanks and of thirst reverberated under the smoke-drifted rafters. The rush of parched customers swept dangerously close to Hippolyte, and Blaster gripped him about the waist. Up to the mahogany and all along it pressed the crowd.

"You should give us some warnin', Hippo," said Blaster. "What you done is as dangerous as shoutin' fire in a crowded theayter."

Hippolyte did not answer him immediately. He was gazing at the bulletin board nailed to the post next which they stood. Printed notices and hand-scrawled advertisements, pictures, business cards, decorated it, some of them ancient and flyblown, others shiningly new.

"My card eet shall go 'ere," pronounced Hippolyte. "Ah, *mon ami,* Blastaire, what a beautiful peecture of you! You are ze famous man!"

He put a finger on a dingy picture of a bearded and sombreroed individual who wore a wolfish air. Over it ran the smudgy caption:

$5,000 REWARD, DEAD OR ALIVE

"That ain't me," said Blaster hurriedly. "It just looks somethin' like me. That is Old Bill Bodine, a tophand road agent. They ought to take that one down. He's been in Boot Hill over in the next territory a long time."

"And ze ozzaires?" Hippolyte's finger went over the array of visages, lowering and tough. "Zey are all clean-shaved! Zey would look so much bettaire wiz ze hair."

THEN he pointed to another picture, which occupied a place of honor alone on the wall, a little distance away. It was that of a famous man whose beard was equally famous.

"Like zis," Hippolyte said. "Zis is noble beard."

"That's Gen'ral Grant," Blaster explained. "You know—won the Civil War and all. That's one of his sabers under it, they say. The boss of this here place is plumb proud of that sticker—keeps it sharp as a razor."

"Ah!" said Hippolyte, his eyes lighting up. "Like I use in Franco-Prussian War."

A hand suddenly jogged at Blaster's elbow and he turned, confronting a nondescript individual.

"Hello, One-Gallus Benny," said Blaster.

"One-Gallus Benny," the grinning, gap-toothed swamper, whose baggy pants were held up precariously by a single suspender, bore two huge shots of red-eye on a tin tray.

"Bartender Splasher Simms he sent 'em to yuh special since Mussoo is buyin'. Grab 'em quick, Blaster. My pants is fallin' down."

Down Blaster's throat went the gigantic drink. His eyes protruded and he waited for the explosion. It came.

"What did you say, Hippo, old benefactor? Beards on them faces? You shall be obliged, Hippo. You can have whatever you want in Eureka, at least till somebody else buys." From his hip pocket he wormed a stub of tally pencil. "Puttin' these on the faces of pitchers was my hobby when I was a angel child. I have done some mighty fine beard-drawin' in McGuffey's Third Reader and elsewhere. Watch!"

The heavy black lead traveled over visage after visage. Beards sprouted where none had grown before. Handlebar mustaches appeared on hairless lips. The features became unrecognizable under the welter of penciled growth.

"There! Now their own mothers wouldn't know em. These 'WANTED' gents do look better, don't they? Hippo, I could make a lot of money goin' for an artist."

"You can pay a lot of money for goin' for an artist instead," said a drawling voice. "That'll cost you two hundred and fifty, Blaster."

United States Deputy Marshal John Pennypacker stood behind Blaster. A white sombrero topped his sun-and-sand-crimsoned face. A myriad crinkles nested around the eyes that looked lazy, but masked a fast gun mind. His slow motions, as all Eureka knew, did not mean he did not have a fast gun hand.

His eyebrows were bleached almost white by the desert sun, and a long, sickle mustache of the same blondish white swung down from his upper lip. With his longish jaw and startlingly contrasting coloration, he suggested a red and white pinto, and was referred to as such by many of his friends and admirers.

The usual wry and casual humor with which he handled the problems of Eureka threaded his tones.

"Hello, Marshal Penny, old paint-hoss!" Blaster hailed him fraternally. "Meet Mussoo Hippolyte Pettypwah of Paree, the professor of tonsorialism. Two hunnerd and fifty? What are you talkin' about?"

"Two hunnerd and fifty dollars, Blaster," drawled Marshal Penny. "That is the lawful fine for defacin' the property

of the United States Government."

"I ain't goin' to pay no Government—"

"That's fifty dollars more for contempt of court, which I am holdin' right here," pronounced Marshal Penny. "Defyin' of your Government in the presence of witnesses. Beware, Blaster, and snaffle yore tongue before I charge yuh with treason. Treason is hangrope."

An enthusiastic bellowing arose from the interested circle of onlookers.

"They're goin' to lynch Blaster Breen! The Government is goin' to hang him from the rafters!"

"Let me pull on his legs! He's owed me ten bucks for the last six months."

Blaster's Adam's apple jerked up and down. He appeared on the verge of a seizure. A hand shot out and it held a fistful of bills.

" 'Ere ees ze money for my fren' Blastaire, *Monsieur le Maréchal,*" the cheery voice of Hippolyte Petitpois broke in. "Hees crime eet was commit' to oblige me. Be'old, Hippolyte Petitpois consider heemself responsible. I 'ave 'ad in my salon in Paree ze great honnaire of daily shaving ze great *Maréchal* Ducrot of ze French Army. May I 'ave ze honnaire of shaving daily ze great *Maréchal* Penny of ze United States Government?"

CHAPTER III

Hippolyte Challenges

MARSHAL PENNY blinked slightly, staring at the bills. He blinked even more on turning his gaze upon the glory of Hippolyte.

"Well, now I do like a good clean shave, Mr. Petitpois," he said. "Take your money back and I'll suspend sentence upon Blaster Breen, the criminal here. I'll parole him in your custody, Mr. Petitpois. See that he don't drink, smoke or gamble for the next thirty days, and that he is in bed prompt at seven o'clock every evenin'."

"Listen, you old pinto—" began Blaster.

"Stand away," said Marshal Penny firmly. "I have a new 'WANTED' ad to put up here and across the street at the post office."

He unfolded a big sheet and held it against the bulletin board. It showed the pictures of four men, arranged in a row.

"Here are Mace Creede and his safe-smashin' gang, the cleverest and murderin'est post office robbers west of the Mississippi, that have ten thousand simoleons on their heads. Names Cash Bradley, Stump Arnold and Hobe Platt.

"They caught 'em and give 'em life in the pen at Frisco, and now they've staged a jail-break and are loose again. Matter of fact, Mace Creede and his boys have been loose close to a year, but the Government is sometimes slow at gettin' out its warnin's except in the territories where the 'Wanteds' are supposed to be. They was last reported in hidin' out in South California, so the Government is notifyin' the Southwest now in case they head east depredatin' along the Border."

"Zey 'ave no beards," said Hippolyte. "Zey 'ave no character in zere faces. Also zey 'ave funny shape chins and 'eads shaved like zat."

"They are killers, Mr. Petitpois," said Marshal Penny. "They have plenty of character, but it is all bad hombre."

He turned on Blaster, just in time to catch the gleam in his eye.

"These ain't any flyblown oldies like you done your defacement on Blaster, and yuh've put some wrong ideas into the heads of the jokin' customers. I'm not goin' to have this important one ruined up. On second thought, I'll put it up just at the post office which is not only the sacred territory of the United States Government, but don't sell drinks to make the spectators playful."

"Post office robbers," snorted Blaster scornfully. "Stamp snatchers. Postcard an' blotter rustlers."

"Yuh'll be amazed at what is comin' into the postoffices by registered mail these days." Marshal Penny folded up the big circular. "Send a mine payroll through by Wells Fargo express, and if it

is road agented, who follers up the robbery? The Wells Fargo express, that's all. Send the payroll cash by registered United States mail to the post office next the mine and if it is held up, who goes to work? Every blame marshal, deputy marshal, and United States officer from Washington to Walla Walla.

"The mines are gettin' smart. They are sendin' their cash by the registered mails in the U. S. sack instead of Wells Fargo express in the boot. If they lose it through road agents, they got thousands on the trail and on the watch-out for the agents, instead of a few express detectives. The U. S. Government never lets up on a post office haul. That's what the Government which yuh defame does, Blaster."

"Oh, yeah?" snorted Blaster. "Beneath the shield of every United States marshal beats a heart of gold an' deathless courage, I suppose you're tryin' to inform me. Well, let me inform you, Marshal Penny, that the less the Government meddles with the rights of private citizens, the better."

The marshal's fingers were exploring the upper pockets of his vest.

"You're an anarchist, Blaster. Next thing you will be tellin' me that the United States Government will end up by taxin' the wages and income of its citizens. What, no seegars? I shall meander to the wooden Indian down the street and get me a mouthful of same."

A sudden flurry of excitement broke out at the roulette table as the batwing doors swung behind Marshal Pennypacker, and the crowd stampeded joyously for it.

"There is a clear space at the bar, which is plumb unusual," said Blaster, mopping his brow. "Let's stake us a claim before it's jumped. I'm all wore out from argufyin' with that red-and-white pinto, Penny."

BLASTER urged Hippolyte to the bar and banged his fist on it. "Splasher" Simms plowed forward, oozing his customary good nature and bar dripplings. He was a portly, bay-windowed man in an apron that was permanently stained by beer and whisky. His hamlike, awkward hands, so Eureka claimed, spilled about half as much outside a glass as he put in.

"Two portions of red-eye and a slab of information, Splasher," said Blaster. "Do you know four queer-lookin' gents, all in black, with beards and hair like grizzlies, who have just come to town? We met up with them and we don't like 'em."

"They are the Merridew Brothers—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, readin' downward by their height," returned Splasher Simms.

He tilted out two shots of red-eye and made two pools on the mahogany in doing so.

"Lessee, now. They're openin' a hardware store down yonder across the street, and they are waitin' fer their stock to come in by the freighter. Been here a week, I reckon. They belong to some quaintsome kind of sect that forbids 'em to do all kinds of things, includin' drinkin' in public. So they buy enough licker here to float a ship and take it home and lap it up secret."

Splasher slapped the cork back into the bottle, promptly breaking it in half.

"That's a low habit," said Blaster scornfully, "but it's better'n not drinkin' at all."

"They are livin' in the store while they fix it up. If you ask me they are a set or ornery— Never mind. Here they come now for their night's supply."

Heavy boots clashed behind Blaster and Hippolyte. Four abreast once more, the bearded, black-garbed men advanced upon them and lined the mahogany. The biggest one, Matthew, brought up inches only from Hippolyte, his cold, slate-gray eyes staring with positive viciousness at him. His mouth opened, exposing yellowish teeth.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he roared. "Monkey! Make room for a man!"

He put his hand out. This time it did not shove Hippolyte off his feet. It came down in a hard slap on the top of his silk hat and drove it downward over his ears.

"Get, monkey!" he barked. "Climb your stick outside!"

Hippolyte sprang backward a pace with amazing swiftness. His eyes flashed.

"*Monsieur!* You go too far!"

"Is that so?" sneered Matthew Merridew. The lowering faces of the four brothers bent on Hippolyte's diminutive form. "Bah!"

A jet of tobacco juice shot from Matthew's beard and struck squarely on Hippolyte's glistening patent leather shoe.

"You speet on my shoe!" cried Hippolyte. "*Monsieur*—take zat!"

He stepped forward and slapped the tall bearded man across the face. He danced back and his voice was high and courageous.

"I challenge! I geeve you my card!"

Matthew Merridew's hand went for the gun that hung in a holster attached to a swivel-bossed flap at his belt. The hands of the other brothers also dived for their Colts and they moved, ringing in Hippolyte. They acted with the precision of concerted, planned action, a flawless team.

"Get him, boys!" snarled Matthew. "Get 'em both!"

Blaster's hand came up, fast and steady, and the gun in it roared flame. Through the flap with the swivel-boss that held Matthew Merridew's gun to his belt the slug tore, and the leather sliced apart. The bearded man's hand, driving down for gun butt, closed on empty air. Gun and scabbard, shot clean away from the belt, slammed on the floor.

Blaster whirled. Three guns were coming out on him at yards' distance. He saw the first one spring into Luke's hand, and Luke's face held murder. The bore jerked level, aimed at Blaster's stomach and Luke's trigger finger tightened.

The form of Hippolyte, launched low, and extended like a fencer thrusting home, went forward and a shriek of agony ripped from Luke as his gun fell. Transfixed by the shining short steel of Hippolyte, Luke's hand poised in mid-air, the dagger dangling from it before it dropped to the floor.

HIPPOLYTE whipped around, and in a bound so swift his body was blurred, leaped across the short space to the wall, and tore from it the cherished sword of General Grant. Quicker than the eye could follow his movements he whirled, blade ready, and lunged with it to the throat of Mark, who was standing next to Luke. The point of the blade disappeared in the beard.

"Drop ze gun!" Hippolyte's voice was icy. "Or I do not just preeck ze skin."

"And you drop yores, Brother John!" barked Blaster to the short, fat man. His Colt covered the last of the quartet. "Put your hands up, every black-bearded son of you!"

The hands went ceilingward as the guns hit the floor. Glaring savagely, the four Merridew Brothers looked like trapped bears. Hippolyte stepped back, sliding his blade into the ornate sheath at his belt.

"*Sales bêtes,*" he said. "Somesing should be done to peoples like you."

"It is goin' to be done, Hippo, old *ami*," remarked Blaster cheerfully. The spectators who had scattered as the guns came out now pressed forward, grinning expectantly. "I'm goin' to do it. Old Judge Blaster Breen is goin' to hold a little court right here. Just like that pinto, Marshal Penny, held his kangaroo court on me. These surroundin' gents can be the jury. I'm ruminatin' on the sentence I shall pronounce on these long-haired coyotes, and when I ruminate I get results."

His mouth opened in a roar.

"Ho, ho, ho, I have got it! For insultin' browbeatin', spittin' on the shoe of, and otherwise bein' guilty of impoliteness, molestin', and attempting murder on a new feller citizen, Mussoo Hippo Petitpwah, the famous Paree barber, I, Judge Blaster Breen, bein' of sound mind and body, do hereby sentence you four Chaparral Boys to have your beards cut off and your heads shaved by the aforesaid Musso Pettypwah in his tonsorial salon across the street pronto. And pay him ten bucks for the cost. Hey, jury of my peers, how is that for a sentence?"

"It be gigantical!" shouted a miner. "But you forgot the shampoo of their

heads with tar, danged if you didn't."

"And use a cactus plant for a towel!"

"There, Chaparral Boys," said Blaster proudly. "The verdict is unamimous. We'll see what is under them thickets—probably mice. You're condemned to the razor 'stead of the rope."

"Why, you—" A murderous light sprang into Matthew Merridew's eyes. "You can't do no such thing!"

"Oh, I can't can't I? I'm the judge and here is the jury. Do you want to fight it up to the United States Soopreme Court?"

Matthew's glance swung from side to side. The other Merridew brothers looked more than ever like cornered animals.

"Marshal Pennypacker," said Matthew, "we appeal to you!"

CHAPER IV

Eureka's Transformation

UNITED STATES Marshal Pennypacker stood close by, a lighted cigar sticking out from under his drooping mustache. Two more cigars protruded from his vest pocket.

"I've pretty well gathered what happened," he drawled. "I got in on the tail end of it. This ain't no Government matter, you Merridews. This is Eureka's private justice. Ask me, I think you have it comin' to you. You blame near committed murder. Go ahead and barber 'em up, Mr. Petitpois."

"No!" shouted Matthew Merridew. "No, you cannot! Marshal, we four brothers are members of the House of Jericho, a sect which does not permit the cuttin' of human hair more than once a year, and that only when the hair and beard are of a certain manly length. In our Book it is written: 'The hair on the face and head of man is sacred. Had the All-Wise Providence intended it to be otherwise, lo, mortal man would be as hairless as the new-laid eggs!' "

"To desecrate our beards and hair, to shave us clean, would cast us out from our sect in shame. And we're the advance guard of our sect. The House of Jericho is plannin' to move from its homesteads in Pennsylvania to these fertile Western valleys. We would be pariahs, and our wives and children would shrink from us in loathin'."

"Oh, shucks," said Blaster disgustedly. "There goes a danged good decision up in smoke. Me, I'll reverse myself. A man's beliefs are his own, and maybe I got some that are funny. In America we don't do anybody a damage because of his beliefs. Marshal Penny, we got to let 'em go."

"Right," the marshal declared.

Blaster pointed at the swinging door.

"Go, beards and long hair," he said grandiloquently. "Go and sin no more! In other words, pick up them fire irons off'n the floor and vamoose!"

The bearded men bent down and retrieved their weapons. They shoved them into their belts. In single file they stalked furiously through the batwings. The sound of their heavy boots on the wooden sidewalk faded out.

"And now, *mes amis*—" cried Hippolyte.

His voice was lost in the raucous din of unloosed cheering as Eureka took its newest citizen to its heart.

"Hooray for Mussoo Hippo, the little gamecock, and his toadsticker!"

"We have got the fightingest Frenchman since Lafayette!"

"And the drink-buyingest Frenchman!"

"Zhentlemen!" Somehow the voice of Hippolyte outrode the clamor. "I sank you! In five mineets across ze street I geeve ze grand opening of my salon tonsorial, *Maison* Petitpois! *Attendez!* I go!"

The crowd poured onto the sidewalk, Blaster watched the lavender frock coat plunge into the shop door. An instant only, it seemed, and a new Hippolyte stood framed in the doorway. His spotless white barber's jacket gleamed in the sunshine, a clean white linen cap was poised on his head. In one hand he brandished a china shaving mug, in the other a long-bladed pair of scissors. His voice rose.

"My fellow ceetizens of glorious Eureka! *Maison Petitpois* ees open for beezness. To ze first customaire to cross ze threshold I offer ze bottle of whiskee! *En avant, mes braves garçons!* I await ze great beard rush!"

Blaster's gaze swung to a few doors away. There in their usual line across the sidewalk in front of a shuttered building that bore the new sign "MERRIDEW BROS. HARDWARE", stood the four sinister black figures, one of them with a blood-stained handkerchief wound around his hand. Their hands were on their gun butts, but they did not move.

The cheering crowd went past Blaster and plunged forward for the door of *Maison* Petitpois.

"He has got the great beard rush," said Blaster. "It will be a wonder if he is not killed in it."

"Or," said Marshal Penny, standing at his side, "by somebody else. Name of Merridew."

But nothing of that was said to Hippolyte, to spoil his joy in his grand opening. That was just the beginning, however, for in the week and a half that passed swiftly, the *Maison* Petitpois easily became the center of attraction in Eureka. And Blaster accepted it as a personal triumph.

THERE came a day when, head up, and hob-nailed boots thudding briskly, Blaster Breen swung along the sidewalk of Continental Street, headed for *Maison* Petitpois. Jovially he shouldered his way through the stream of citizens that eddied along the arcades. But it was a different citizenry from that of ten days ago. Blaster stared at faces that were familiar but strangely new, for the old countenances that he had known had undergone transformations by the score.

The bristling hirsute growths were gone. In their place reigned neatly-trimmed Vandykes, luxuriously curled Burnsides, Napoleon III goatees and imperials, magnificent handlebars, beards that resembled those of General Ulysses S. Grant and General Robert E. Lee.

Visages that had been hidden for years were suddenly bared to view. A strange aroma of *eau de cologne*, witch hazel, and hair lotion fought with the odor of red-eye, tobacco smoke and perspiration that emanated from the batwing doors.

"All Eureka is stormin' the doors of *Maison* Petitpois," thought Blaster, grinning. He waved cheerily to a broad-chested fellow miner whose one-time tangled thicket had become a lustrous, square-cut spade beard. "Howdy, Nebuchadnezzar."

"I didn't buy me no Nebuchadnezzar," called the spade-bearded one. "That one would be waved and anointed and would cost five bucks. I bought me the Assyrian Monarch for two and a half."

Blaster dodged a set of New England jowl chin whiskers and a Spanish Grandee V-trim and brought up in front of *Maison* Petitpois. His eyes bulged.

"What's going on?" he inquired. "I've been blastin' and bangin' away at the mines all day."

Against the front of *Maison* Petitpois stretched a long, somewhat ancient leather settee. Before the settee on the wooden sidewalk were placed small brightly painted tables and on the tables rested miniature coffee cups. Aged copies of *Harper's Weekly* and *Leslie's Weekly* were clutched in the hands of freshly barbered and lotioned citizens.

One hulking ore-wagon driver, with corrugated brow, was conning the pages of a six-months-old illustrated copy of the Paris *Figaro*. In boxes along the rim of the sidewalk four-foot cactus plants reared by way of urban greenery.

"Yuh ask what's goin' on, Blaster?" inquired the student of the *Figaro*. "Mussoo Hippo he has put his booleyvard caffay and library in for his regular customers. He says he always had one in Paree and he served his regulars—dukes, and generals and such—demmytasseys. These here are demmytasseys with coneyack in 'em after their operations have been performed." Carefully he lifted the tiny coffee cup. "Demmytasseys with tanglefoot. Mussoo Hippo is aimin' to bring the

refined art of grashus Paree livin' to the American Frontier, he says."

"He has brung it," said Blaster. "He has got me takin' my Saturday night bath on Wednesday also. I am goin' to waller me in his tank and get three days' ore chamber grit out of my pores."

He moved on inside. The vivid colors of a desert sunset splashed into the barber shop. Bright chintz curtains hung across the front window, in her wicker cage Clothilde raised a trilling song. Already individual shaving mugs with names on them lined the shelf and on one was painted the American flag with the legend:

By Special Appointment to
Marshal Pennypacker,
and the United States
Government

A customer reposed in the shining barber's chair and behind him Hippolyte hovered.

"Allo, Blastaire!" he hailed joyously. "Zis ees my last customaire before I close and take ze 'oliday for tonight. Go 'ave ze bath and I am weeth you *toute de suite*."

"All right, Hippo," said Blaster, and passed through the first partition.

HERE was the pine-walled bedroom of Hippolyte Petitpois, immaculately neat and tidy. Curtains made a closet on the walls, a small cot crowded one wall and over it hung a framed and faded picture of an opaque-eyed gentleman with a mustache and imperial, clad in a French marshal's uniform and gold-braided *képi*. It bore the lettering:

Napoleon III, Imperateur de France

Under it hung a saber and a cavalry pistol, the relics of Hussar Lieutenant Hippolyte Petitpois.

Blaster went on into the next compartment of the long store building and brought up against the big galvanized iron tub. Two boilers full of water stood in the corner, a smaller boiler simmered on the stove.

The back door of the building, giving practically onto the tub, was open and through it Blaster took in a vista of sand, running to the lip of an arroyo two hundred yards away. Beyond stretched the limitless expanse of desert, cactus-dotted and mesquite-patched, and in the far distance rose the blue blur of mountains.

One after the other Blaster's mine-stained garments hit the floor. He wrenched up a boiler of water and sloshed it into the tub. From the stove he threw in half the simmering water and plunged hip deep in the tank, clutching a huge bar of bright yellow soap.

"Now if I had a sailboat to push around with my feet or a wood duck, I'd be back in my happy childhood days," he murmured, and grinned.

Lathered from head to midriff with the strong soap, he thrashed and wallowed, then stretched his huge, hair-matted frame out at full length in the tepid luxury, closing his eyes.

"Be'old, Blastaire, I am 'ere," came the voice of Hippolyte Petitpois. "Wiz ze superb sairvice for my *ancien camarade*. Ze warm tanglefoot in ze warm stomach in ze warm bath, w'at is more gracious leeving?"

Blaster's groping hand caught a towel and he rubbed the soap out of his eyes. Hippolyte, smiling cherubically, stood beside the iron tub, holding out a double shot of red-eye on a tray. He executed his jackknife drawing room bow.

"The art of grashus livin' all right," said Blaster.

He slapped the wet towel on the tub's edge by the door. Out across the sand on the arroyo rim something stirred. It was like a shrub or a dark bush, moved by a vagrant wind. But the thin, tiny tube that projected over the arroyo's lip did not look like a branch from a bush.

It glinted in the sun, and a jet, two jets of smoke, leaped from it. Screaming, the bullets tore through the open door and passed inches only over Hippolyte's low bending body. They passed through the bedroom and the barber ship, and glass splintered in the window on the street.

"Hippo, hit the floor!" shouted Blaster

and, gripping his arm, pulled him.

Blaster went down in the tub like a duck diving for the bottom. The gunfire lowered instantly and shot after shot thudded into the heavy iron side of the tub. Then there was silence.

"I counted 'em," choked Blaster. "His magazine's empty!"

CHAPTER V

It Pays to Be Polite

HAULING himself, naked and sputtering, over the end of the tub out of sight of the door, Blaster glued his eye to a knot-hole in the back wall. No black spot or bush, no glistening tube showed any longer over the arroyo's rim. Cautiously Blaster reached out an arm, got the handle of the door, and slammed it.

"He's gone, Hippo," he said. "Gone but not forgot. If you hadn't made your famous drawin' room bow, you'd have had two slugs through your chest. It pays to be polite."

Hippolyte had come up from the floor and the protection of the tub. His eyes flashed fire.

"Rascal! *Franc tireur!* And who—"

"I seen a black spot movin' at the arroyo," said Blaster, "but it wasn't no bush like I thought at first. It was one of them low-crowned black hats or a black beard. It was one of the Chaparral Boys, them unmerry Merridew Brothers that lives three-four stores from this one. Hippo, with this back door open anybody could draw a bead on you clean through this buildin' from the arroyo, and gun you while you was breathin' down the neck of a customer. That gent wanted you."

Blaster was toweling his hairy frame vigorously, blowing out his cheeks in honest indignation. He pointed to the flattened bullets that had hit the tub and fallen on the floor.

"He wanted me, too, for a damn side dish. You'd better keep this back door shut and do your sleepin' up at the hotel along with me till we get on some kind of a workin' basis with these Chaparral Boys. It's their second try for us."

"I am not afraid of zem," said Hippolyte defiantly.

"You can be too cussed fearless in Eureka. Boot Hill is full of fearless folks. Maybe we stirred them House of Jericho prophets up too much when we humiliated 'em. That kind figure they can wipe out a humiliation only with a killin', and the Book of Jericho may have a ban on the cuttin' down of beards but it don't seem to have one on the cuttin' down of your neighbor."

He crammed his clothes on and led the way to the front of the store.

"We got us a problem to figure out," he said then. "I ain't goin' to bring no Marshal Pennypacker into it till we've collected us some evidence. Matter of fact, Marshal Penny he suspects them Chaparral Boys mean to down you.

"I am ruminatin', and I am cogitatin' my thoughts, Hippo. I'm goin' back to the hotel and sleep me a nap for a few hours to clear the mind. I was blastin' for twelve hours today, and last night I was up all night drawin' to inside straights. Where do I find you when I get up refreshed?"

"I shall be at ze Mesquite. Zere ees a gambler zere from New Orleans wiz whom I play ze piquet and discuss intelligently ze French cooking."

Blaster shoved through the front door and found his path obstructed by half a dozen curious citizens standing in front of the plate glass window. Two bullets had torn clear through it, leaving neat, starred punctures.

"Who done that, Blaster?" demanded one of the onlookers.

"Hippo's canary. It pecked too hard."

Blaster elbowed on his way. He came into the sidewalk of the post office, three doors from *Maison* Petitpois and again found his path blocked. A score or more of Eureka's idle stood around, loafing and commenting.

"Here she comes!" yelled a voice.

"Rollin' in on the minute with old Leather Face Hanks at the ribbons and Bangaway Jake Rudd ridin' shotgun!"

Down the street toward the post office swept the stage with its four horses straining gallantly in their collars. A spectator shoved his head in the post office door.

"Hey, Post Office Pete, come a-runnin'! Stage is in!"

AT THE call, a lathlike, stoop-shouldered clerk in a baize apron and an eyeshade appeared on the porch. The stage pulled up in front of the post office with a shriek of brakes and the thud of halted hoofs. "Leatherface" Hanks, the dusty and gnomelike driver, leaned out from his perch, shoving the whip back into its socket.

"Hiya, Post Office Pete!" he yelled. "United States mails! Brought in against all obstacles includin' your dumb clerk who kept us waitin' half an hour at Mesa City. Sling 'em off, Bangaway!"

"Bangaway Jake" Rudd, the big shotgun guard, reached down and his brawny arm hurled a sack onto the sand.

"There's your ordinary mails, Post Office Pete!" roared Bangaway Jake. "They are the usual load of overdue bills for Eureka's citizens, and the letters from their wives askin' 'em when in blazes they are goin' to make their lucky strike and come home to the farms and families they deserted in Ohio and Illinoy. Leave 'em lay. Here comes the registered."

He lifted a plethoric sack and it hit the street.

"Look at the overstuffed baby! Ninety thousand bucks in cash packages in that there sack, said yore stamp-lickin' clerk at Mesa City. Hooray for pay day at the mines! Sign for the ninety thousand beauty, Mr. Post Office Pete."

The thinnish clerk scribbled on his form pad and passed the receipts up. Through the gaping crowd of spectators he carried the registered mail sack on his shoulder into the building.

"Ninety thousand bucks in that there sack!" bellowed Blaster. "Look out yuh don't break your back, Post Office Pete, with that load of lucre. And look out the big, bad bogeymen don't get it while your attention is on readin' our postal cards."

Guffawing, he strode through the spectators and came up alongside a tall figure in black. Matthew Merridew stood beside the corner stanchion of the post office awning. Blaster's gaze traveled challengingly over him from bearded face to boots and back again. The cold-slate-gray eyes were unreadable.

"Huh!" he told himself, pushing on. He had seen the cactus spikes sticking out from the lower part of Matthew Merridew's heavy black boots. "I had about expected it would be Brother Matthew. There's no cactus on Continental Street, but there's plenty in that arroyo!"

Back at the hotel, after his nap, Blaster Breen brushed a hairy hand over his orange-red thatch and ran it through his beard, wringing off the last drops of the basin of water into which he had dunked his head. Revivified, rollicking, and with the last remnants of sleep out of his system, he left his room and once more marched along the arcades.

It was well past midnight and on this side of Continental Street, devoted entirely to daytime business, there was hardly a passerby. He passed the darkened fronts of stores and came up to the post office.

"Halt!" croaked a voice. A shadowy, lean figure rose seemingly from nowhere and it held a Winchester. "Who's there? Friend or enemy? Advance and give the —Oh, shucks, it is nobody but Blaster Breen!"

"Hello, Pop Dorgan," said Blaster, raising his voice in the manner of one addressing the hard of hearing.

He stared at the thin old man, with the flat Stetson, who had risen from the chair on which he had been sitting, tilted against the post office wall. His muscles jerked in surprise. From the ancient guard's cheeks swayed a set of perfect weeper whiskers, and a flowing waterfall mustache joined them together.

"What have you done to yourself, for cryin' cougar's sake! What in blazes are

them things where your tobacco-stained, rat-tail beard used to hang respectably?"

"There are what Mussoo Hippo calls Lord Dundreary lambrequins, a four-dollar special," said "Pop" Dorgan proudly, pulling at the left-hand drape. "Takes twenty years off of my features, says my wife, and makes me resemble a duke. Me, I have come out of my retirement to be a special post office guard, and in the name of the United States Government I challenge every suspicious passerby."

"You a special post office guard? Is the Government gone loco?"

"I can shoot, and I am plumb trustworthy, Blaster, despite my slight deefness and the ailments of advancin' years. Five bucks a night I get when there is huge lucre in the post office safe, like tonight. And I can set in a chair while I do my post office guardin'. So my rheumatics I got at Lookout Mountain don't matter, though the colic misery is still bad. Ouch, there it comes again!"

HE PUT his hand to his midriff, grimacing. "Five-six hours more I got to set here till dawn and Post-office Pete comes. I reckon I'll just have to grin and bear it, but if I could only get across the street to the Mesquite once or twice and put a warmin' remedy inside me I'd be able to forget the pain."

"Hand me yore rifle," said Blaster. "And run across and swaller the red-eye you hanker for. I've been a soldier, Pop, so I can do special post office guard as good as you. The United States Government has got no right to insist you suffer so. Go get your stomach and thirst remedy while I protect the ninety thousand simoleons."

"It's in the safe, Blaster," said Pop. "The safe is behind the counter so you can't see it through the window. There ain't no back door—just this one, and it's padlocked. You keep the post office while I go for my cure, and I'll be back in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

"Two shakes of red-eye, three maybe, you'll be back in," soliloquized Blaster as Pop Dorgan shambled rapidly for the lighted front of the Mesquite.

He swung the rifle expertly to his shoulder, cocked his cigar in the corner of his mouth and began to perambulate briskly up and down in front of the post office window.

"To walk my post in a military manner, takin' notice of everything that goes on within sight and hearin'. General Orders. What is this?"

He stopped in front of the bulletin board, by the side of the padlocked front door. The faces of four clean-shaven individuals stared at him from the big poster with "WANTED FOR POST OFFICE ROBBERIES" above it. The faces were malign and hard.

"Tough hombres, huh," remarked Blaster. "This was the poster that Marshal Penny wouldn't put up in the Mesquite for fear of gettin' it defaced. Well, there ain't no Marshal Penny lurkin' behind my back now, and these faces can stand plenty of improvement. Let's see how they'll look with dook's lambrequins exactly like Pop's. It will be a tasty way to amuse myself while waitin'."

CHAPTER VI

Brother Business

OUT came Blaster's tally pencil, and the Dundreary weepers and waterfall mustaches commenced to sprout on visage after visage.

"Now for some flat hats like Pop's, and he will have a conniption fit to go along with his colic when he sees this."

The hats went on. Blaster stepped back and, grinning, surveyed his handiwork.

"No," he opined critically, "I done a poor job on these two outside lambrequins. I'll fill 'em in for real bushes." Rapidly he swept in the strokes. "There! They're quite different post office robbers. They are—"

His jaw dropped and he stared at the bushy-bearded pair with the flat black hats. His hand shook as he turned the two remaining lambrequins into full thickets.

"They're the Chaparral Boys! They're the House of Jericho! The Merridew Brothers are the Mace Creede post office gang with hair!"

His eyes g l i n t e d with inspiration. Reaching up he tore the poster away from its tacks, folded it and thrust it into his shirt. He could see Pop Dorgan pushing out from the batwing doors of the Mesquite and coming back.

"Here you are, Pop," he said, turning over the rifle. "I hope you won't run into anything worse'n colic tonight. I'm off for elsewhere."

The old man settled back into his chair as Blaster galloped for the Mesquite. He charged into the place like a stampeded steer. Hippolyte Petitpois, resplendent in his lavender suit, sat at a table by the wall in excited triumph over a pallid-faced gambler. He was scooping in the last trick.

"Game!" he exulted. "Zat ees ze third game in succession I have won from you, my New Orleans *ami!* Ah, Hippolyte Petitpois, he has learn' hees piquet in ze boulevard cafes of Paree. Ze piquet of New Orleans eet ees not ze piquet of Paree."

"Hippo, you're a wizard." The pale-faced gambler smiled and tossed a ten-dollar bill toward him.

"Ah, my fren' Blastaire," greeted Hippo. "Watch me deal."

"No deal," snapped Blaster. "Out of here. Over to your shop."

Blaster seized Hippolyte firmly by the collar of his lavender frock coat and lifted him to his feet. He rushed him, volubly protesting, out the door and across the street.

"W'at ze thundaire ees all zis about, Blastaire?" inquired Hippolyte, once inside *Maison* Petitpois. "Be'old I am in ze run of fortune at ze cards and you 'ave cost me much money."

"I have made you much money," said Blaster excitedly. "Money for both of us. We are pardners in this." He pulled out the circular. "It looks like my lucky strike has found me at last. Look at this, Hippo! Are they or are they not our bully-in', bush-whackin' friends, the Chaparral Boys?"

Hippolyte's eyebrows arched in amazement. His gaze turned from the pictures with the penciled beards and low-crowned hats to the text.

"Eet eès our fren's, Blastaire! See you, ze descriptions, ze height, ze hair! Two of zem light hair, ze beard of zat Luke I poke my blade into was dyed, I could see zat at close range. Ze beard and hair of ze beeg bully, Matthef, eet ees also dyed. In ze sunshine on ze street w'en he pass zis *maison* eet has ze purple accent. Ze noses, ze set of ze eyes, I cannot be mistake' in zese men. As ze barber I know ze physiognomy!"

"Smart hombres!" growled Blaster. "They hid out in some hole-in-the-wall for nigh a year after their jailbreak, growin' the disguise. That House of Jericho uniform, that marchin' in formation, that brother business—that's plumb smart, too. Of course, they didn't dare have you shave 'em and bring their real faces and heads out. They made 'em a character as crackbrains, and nobody questions what a crackbrain does. It lets 'em into a town with a post office without no suspicions and, Hippo, this town has got a post office and right now that post office has got ninety thousand dollars in its tin can safe. Get the idea?"

THE Frenchman's eyes were wide. "Zey know of ze large money what comes now by ze mails? Zey will attack ze Eureka post office, Blastaire?"

"They didn't come here to sell hardware, Hippo. That is another good blind that lets 'em rent a store for livin' quarters near the post office. They want you out of the way, Hippo, because they got to pass your shop to get to the post office and barbers is up till all hours. Right now, guardin' that ninety thousand bucks is nobody but old Pop Dorgan, and they can overwhelm him in fifteen seconds. That big hunk Matthew, who is Mace Creede, saw that ninety thousand come in, and heard all about it. They'll hit that post office tonight, Hippo, 'cause tomorrow

that payroll will be gone."

"Ah!" breathed Hippolyte. "We shall expose zem to ze great Marshal Penny-packer!"

"We'll expose nobody, and have that pinto Marshal Penny and his posse cut in on the reward. I told you this was my lucky strike, Hippo, and that it's big money for us both. We'll capture the Chaparral Boys and collect the reward single-handed. We both got guns. Ten thousand bucks to split between us, Hippo!"

"Ten thousand dollaires!"

"Set down and plan this out regular." Blaster swiveled the barber's chair around and seated himself in as though it were a throne. "Old General Blaster Breen will now go into his cogitatin' and his ruminatin'."

"Proceed, Blastaire," urged Hippolyte. "I am all ears."

From his coat pocket he drew something wrapped in paper, and reaching up into the darkened cage of Clothilde drew out the canary and set it on the floor.

"Ze cake I buy for Clothilde. She shall 'ave her dinnaire while we converse."

The canary hopped lightly about the board floor, pecking at the broken bits of cake that Hippolyte tossed down.

"Turn the lamp down, Hippo. We'll put it out presently, and go into ambush here in the dark back of your door, waitin' for the Chaparral Boys to pass. Then we creep out and we've got 'em cold between our six-guns and old Pop's Winchester before they even reach the post office. We—"

"Mon Dieu!". exclaimed Hippolyte. "Clothilde! Clothilde!"

On the edge of a large knothole poised a choice bit of cake. Clothilde's hearty peck sent it dropping through. Fluttering her wings, then folding them tightly, Clothilde thrust herself through the knothole and disappeared from view in pursuit.

"She has flown through ze knothole!" wailed Hippolyte. "She has gone under ze floor! She ees imprison'!"

"She is doggone well imprisoned," said Blaster. "The sand has gone and drifted up clear to the floor around these buildings. You got a clawhammer handy, Hippo? We'll have to take up the floorboards to rescue Clothilde."

A faint, frightened cheeping arose.

"I get ze tools. Have courage, Clothilde!"

Hippolyte darted into the rear of the shop. He was back, flushed with excitement, bearing a hammer and a crowbar.

"Rescue ees coming, Clothilde!" He thrust the end of the crowbar under the wide, short plank and heaved. Up came the plank, torn from its ancient fastening, and a feathered ball of yellow soared into the room.

"Ah, Clothilde! You are save'!"

Blaster Breen stared down from the vantage of the barber's chair at what the upheaved plank revealed.

"Great cryin' cougars!" he gasped.

He sprang from the chair and seized the lamp from the wall, thrusting it down into the aperture. A wide and deep trench yawned under the flooring of *Maison* Petitpois. It ran parallel to the street and Blaster thrust his head far down into it, staring eastward. A dim light some distance off in the trench appeared, and the muffled sound of voices traveled to him. Blaster's face was wet with sweat as he pulled himself back onto the floor.

"Wait for 'em behind your door, huh?" he said huskily. "Hippo, they're under the post office already! The Mace Creede Chaparral Boys have dug a tunnel clear through from their store to the post office! No wonder they meant to bully you and menace you clear out of town at first sight, or bushwhack you this afternoon. You've been livin' and workin' for ten days over the tunnel they been drivin'. Drivin' for ninety thousand bucks at the end of their rainbow."

"Mon Dieu! Zey weel walk off weeth ninety thousand dollaires!"

"They will not!" A grim look hardened Blaster's big face. "Hippo you and I have got 'em boxed. We've got that there ten thousand reward in the hollow of our hands. I can feel my share bulgin' my

hip pocket already, or maybe goin' down my throat at the Mesquite. Them Chaparral Boys are down there at the end of this tunnel. We go down the tunnel and take 'em unawares. Get your gun, Hippo, little pardner. We're goin' to crawl."

"Ah!" cried Hippolyte, jubilantly. "Eet ees ze great adventure!"

He was back from the bedroom, his big cavalry pistol in his hand, as Blaster wrenched up a second plank to let his big body through. Softly Blaster dropped into the tunnel and Hippolyte hit its bottom beside him. Blaster lifted the uptorn planks back into place and utter darkness engulfed them.

A FAINT glow ahead still came from down the trench. Blaster went forward on his hands and knees. The trench was roomy, built so that a crawling man could make fast progress, and in the soft sand all movement was soundless.

"Only two stores to go and then the post office," whispered Blaster. "Here's the next store." He raised his hand and it struck something that was heavy but yielding. "They do things to the last detail, them Chaparral Boys. This is a screen of cloth covered with sand and put over the foot or so of space between the buildin's so's no trench can show from the street. Forward the Light Brigade!"

"Ze Old Guard dies, but he nevair surrunders!" whispered Hippo.

The tunnel made a turn around a shelf of rock and straightened out again. It was yards only now from the post office, and ahead a wall of black loomed across it. The sound of voices had ceased, but there were other sounds that Blaster could not make out. On he crawled and his hand came up against the huge boulder buried in the sand around which the tunnel curved.

He wormed his body around the rock and stared down. He was looking into a big pit, dug out of the hard-packed desert sand and in the pit worked three bearded figures. They moved fast and expertly.

"Gosh!" breathed Blaster as Hippolyte's slight form came abreast of him. "These are professionals! I'll be a cryin' cougar if they ain't made themselves a perfect ore chamber! Look at the shorin' and the sett!"

CHAPTER VII

Bull's-Eye

IN THE light of a lantern the Brothers Luke and John stood on a portable platform, their heads almost touching the post office floor. They were screwing crosspieces onto the planks where the joists had been cut away.

The burly Matthew sawed steadily with an inch-wide steel through the soft pine boards. Hinges were screwed into the flooring and the outline of the trap-door was coming into completion. Balks of timber shored it, and a plan of the post office was tacked on one of them.

There was not a word among the sweating workers, and the work of saw and screwdriver went along with absolute teamwork. All three men had their guns on.

"Get it?" muttered Blaster. "They've got the post office safe settin' right atop the trap-door they made out of the floor under it. Knock them shorin's away and —*plop!*—without any sound the safe will fall through the trap onto the sand. It's a pleasure to watch real safe-robbin' experts at work."

"Ready?" said Matthew in a low voice. "Ready, Stump and Hobe?"

"All right, Mace," said Luke.

The three men leaped from the sett and lifted the light framework to the side of the pit. The pseudo Matthew Merridew stood in the center of the pit with a sledge in his hand, its head muffled with cloth.

"Ze fourth brozzaire, Mark, w'ere ees he?" whispered Hippolyte.

"Standing lookout on the store or out back holdin' the horses in the arroyo," answered Blaster. "Here comes the safe, Hippo. The minute she hits the sand, we out with our cannon and paralyze the

Mace Creede Chaparral Boys."

Matthew swept the sledge back over his brawny shoulder, it swung forward, and the shoring balks spun away under its impact. Down from the flooring of the post office swung the trap, a square black metal object plunged through it and hit the bottom of the pit. It stood upright, carried straight down by its weight. Luke jumped forward, tilted a shoring balk back under the swinging trap and thrust it upward, closing the flooring and bracing it.

"Beautiful!" murmured Blaster. "No more sound than your canary landin' on its feet, Hippo. If Pop Dorgan peeks through the window, he can't even see the safe is gone underground. Since he's about half-deaf and probably snoozin', his ears won't do him any good."

The fattish John jumped forward, unrolling a leather kit. From it he took a wedge, thin as paper, and drove it into the door crack of the safe above the lock with a small, muffled hammer. A second larger wedge followed, and a third. A fourth went in and Matthew stepped up with the sledge. Luke stood by, holding an open cigar box.

"Draw," whispered Blaster. "We've got 'em crimson-handed!

A gasp of horror broke from him as his hand, reaching for his scabbard, met only emptiness.

"My six-gun! Gone! It has joggled out of the holster somewheres while I was hands and kneein' it! Hippo, cock yore artillery and pass it to me."

"I can't pass eet to you," came Hippolyte's voice, "but I cannot cock eet, Blastaire. I 'ave forgot to clean eet zees many months. Ze 'ammaire—you try."

Blaster felt the gun shoved into his hand and savagely he, too, tried to bring the hammer back. The rusted mechanism would not move.

"No good!" he groaned. "We got to crawl back and give a general alarm!"

In the pit Matthew's muffled sledge struck with terrific force on the wedge and the crack in the safe widened.

"We've got her, boys!" he muttered hoarsely. "Get another wedge in, Stump. Two, three more swipes does it. Hobe, you shelve that box. We don't need the stuff. The wedges are crackin' this tinpot wide."

THE pseudo Luke moved so quickly that Blaster had no time to duck back. Luke's hands, rising over the tunnel rim, set the open cigar box on the sand almost under Blaster's nose. His eyes, peering from amid his mat of hair, stared straight into those of Blaster. His mouth opened.

Furiously Blaster struck with the barrel of Hippolyte's pistol, taking Luke on the head. The robber went down in a heap on the bottom of the pit. As Blaster struck there was the heavy thud of the sledge and a crackling, rending sound. The wrecked safe door gaped, cleanly sprung.

"Open!" exulted Matthew. "And here's the loot! What the—Hobe!"

"Back!" rasped Blaster. "Back, Hippo, for your life!"

Matthew's gaze swerving up, caught the two faces looking down. The sledge went into the pit wall, his hand flashed to his belt.

"Breen and that cussed Frenchie! Get 'em, boys!"

Blaster reached out and grabbed at the wooden object in front of him. He got himself around and, crushing together, he and Hippolyte squirmed the few yards to the cover of the rock. They crouched there pressed together in the dark. Blaster was hugging the cigar box to his chest.

"Shove that cash in the bag," came Matthew's harsh voice from the pit, out of Blaster's sight. "Then get Hobe Platt on his feet. He's comin' to. You, up there behind that rock, come out with your hands up! You haven't got guns or you'd have fired long ago."

"Like blazes we will!" roared Blaster. "I'm goin' to yell for the guard! I'm goin' to yell bloody murder! You may have us boxed, but so have we got you boxed."

"Yell away!" snarled Matthew. "We'll be out of here before that old fool guard can do a blame thing. You've got us boxed, have you?" The clear, carrying hoot of

an owl rose from the pit and traveled under the flooring. "Listen to that!"

From Blaster's rear instantly sounded an answering hoot.

"Our other pardner, Cash Bradley, is comin' after you, Breen. That's a call to come in a hurry. And he's got a double-barreled sawed-off. When that goes off we go clear through the tunnel and away."

Blaster stared back down the tunnel in the direction of Hippolyte's shop and the Merridew Brothers' store. Light wavered under the floors of the buildings, a light that grew clearer, jumping up and down.

"He has got us, Hippo!" Blaster panted. "That's the missin' Mark, the guard at their store, crawlin' down on us with a sawed-off and a bull's-eye lantern hung around his neck. Soon as he rounds that rock yonder we're blowed to ribbons. And the merry Merridews make their getaway."

"Non!" said Hippolyte clamly. *"Non!* Ze missing Mark he mus' come round ze rock. I go to meet heem."

"You're goin' to take on a man with a sawed-off shotgun?" breathed Blaster. "In a tunnel? With your bare hands?"

"Wis zis." Hippolyte held up his slim, short steel. "Wiz ze *arme blanche.*"

"You buy me one minute's time and I'll do somethin' myself," said Blaster. His hands were busy in the cigar box, expertly sorting its contents. "I got a peek at what's in this thing they didn't need to use. I'll surprise you. Luck to you, Hippo, you little gamecock."

"Bonne chance, camarade," said Hippo.

The dark of the tunnel swallowed him as he went fast on his hands and knees toward the light. Blaster worked furiously and fast, his clasp knife open and slicing. His blunt fingers, in the dark, fixed and arranged. With every second the light of the bull's eye grew clearer as it neared the first rock.

"All right, boys!" he heard Matthew say savagely. "Into the tunnel. We're off!"

"Is that so?" shouted Blaster.

"We're comin' for you, Breen!" snarled Matthew.

ALONG the seat of Blaster's corduroy pants went the match and sputtered into flame. He touched it to the thing he held in his hand and sparks spat out. Jerking upright, he looked over the top of the rock. Matthew Merridew was just hauling himself over the lip of the tunnel, only feet away. His savage, bearded face looked twice life-size, staring into Blaster's. He had his six-gun between his teeth by the trigger and guard and as he lifted himself into the shelf his right hand reached up and grasped it.

Over the top of the rock went Blaster's hand and the thing it held fell to the sand in front of Matthew. Matthew's eyes protruded from his head in horror, his involuntary recoil jerked his body back and he hung halfway in the tunnel and halfway in the pit, momentarily undecided.

"More to come, if need be!" yelled Blaster vehemently.

Fighting for balance, Matthew got his six-gun up and Blaster crouched back. "When it comes to firin' it's who fires the first and the biggest that counts!" he bawled.

He turned and stared back up the tunnel. The light was coming around the shoulder of the rock. It flared straight down the trench, mercilessly revealing Blaster's big form. It lifted upward and Blaster knew what that meant. Mark had risen from a crawling position to his knees to fire.

He saw the deadly twin barrels jutting forward in the glare of the bull's-eye that hung on Mark's chest, he glimpsed the bush of beard at the stock as the barrels leveled on him. He saw also the figure of Hippolyte prone on the floor of the tunnel, not four yards from the bull's-eye. Hippolyte was slowly inching forward.

Blazing, the sawed-off roared and its pattern of lead whipped inches only above Blaster's flattened form and slugged into the rock behind him. The muzzles lowered for the second barrel that surely would not miss him.

A lavender arm swept into view in the bull's-eye sheen, the right arm of Hippolyte going forward from behind his shoul-

der as he lifted himself on his left hand, under the sawed-off's barrels. There was a flash of light through the drifting smoke. The clean shimmer of steel driving straight for the chest of the kneeling Mark.

Then all vision, all hearing vanished in the tunnel in a single tremendous roar. From the other side of the rock against which Blaster lay, the pit side, rose flame and smoke and the reeling impact of the terrific explosion of a stick of dynamite. . . .

Blaster had little recollection of what happened after that until somehow or other he found himself surrounded by excited men, and heard his own voice telling Marshal Penny what had happened—so far as he knew.

"Sure I cut the fuse to five seconds," said Blaster. "I dynamited 'em with their own safe-crackin' supply that was in the cigar box I grabbed. No, Marshal, I didn't sling the stick into the pit like an amateur and blow 'em to smithereens. They was ninety thousand in post office cash in a bag that would have gone up in smoke if I had done something like that.

"Me, I am an expert dynamite man. I let my pretty plaything drop onto a sand base with the rock to back it, and threw it sidewise and blew the whole top and side of the pit in on 'em. I drowned 'em in sand. Dig till you strike beards, boys!"

CHAPTER VIII

Lucky Strike

AIDED by the light of lanterns under the open trap a crew of men with shovels delved into the heaped sand that swamped the pit. Soon the first form was emerging from its interment, that of Luke. The digging crew shoveled on and John came to light. Both men were senseless and purple in the face from strangulation, covered from head to feet with clinging sand.

"You blew the blazes out of the post office floor," said the marshal, grinning, and jerked his thumb upward to the splintered boards. The faces of an excited crowd peered through the ruins. "You knocked old Pop Dorgan into the middle of Continental Street and all the glasses fell off the Mesquite bar where I was, an' broke. You've got a sweet bill for damages to pay, Blaster."

"Listen, you old pinto," growled Blaster. "I've saved the Government a fortune and captured four desperate 'Wanteds' for you. The missin' Mark is layin' wounded down in the tunnel waitin' to be dragged out. Hippo got him with his little toad-sticker. Right into Luke's chest he slung it in the face of Luke's sawed-off."

"I 'ave charge ze Prussian cannon at Sedan," said Hippolyte debonairly. The lavender frock coat was a ruin, the beautifully creased pants were sand-stained and wrinkled into a hopeless mess. "What is ze sawed-off aftaire zat? Be'old, I can throw ze blade as well as I can fence wiz it."

"And here is Brother Matthew, my particular pard, completin' the roundup," said Blaster.

The shovels, busily plying, uncovered a pair of tall black boots. They stuck up from under the weight of sand in ungainly stiffness. Blaster produced a cigar and, leaning down, struck a match on the sole of the nearest protruding boot. He ignited the cigar.

"Thanks, Matthew, old scratchbox, you saved my pants. What do I care about damages, Marshal? You owe Hippo and me ten thousand bucks reward. Look, this is how I got on to 'em. This come off the post office board."

He drew the crumpled circular with its penciled beards, from his hip pocket, and shoved it into Pennypacker's hand.

"Ah!" said the marshal. "Not only defaced Government property again, despite official warnin', but you stole it. And just where do you see anything about a ten-thousand-buck reward? That was the first time they was captured. Either the Post Office Department forgot to offer a reward after they broke jail or they ain't got the money to pay out twice. There ain't no

reward on these desperados' heads, Blaster. You must have been seein' things!"

An agonized howl rang under the post office floor. It became a splutter as Blaster stepped back. The unconscious form of Mace Creede, alias Matthew Merridew, limp and sand-encrusted, was lifted from its resting place and thrust aloft through the hole in the post office floor.

"Take 'em to the calaboose," ordered Marshal Pennypacker, placidly. "Roll 'em over a barrel or somethin' till the sand comes out of their lungs. Back to the pen in Frisco they go."

"So Hippo and I get—"

"You get zero," said Marshal Pennypacker. "It's the break of the luck."

"It is the break of the cussedest—"

Wildly Blaster's fist lashed out and it struck solid rock. It was the wall of rock against which he had set off his explosion, stripped now of sand for a full six feet at the side of the pit. It gleamed with a strange whiteness that ran in huge splotches and veins amid the black, revealed by the blast.

"Luck! Luck! Break of the luck! It's come! It's come!"

The roar reverberated in the pit. Blaster was pressing a quarter against the nearest white splotch. The coin came away and its imprint was clear on the space.

"Hippo, little pardner It's ours! Like I said, silver is where you least expect it. I was right when I waited for my silver mountain to find me. It's a spur of rich and wealthy ore runnin' out from the hills, and it's half mine and half yours. In Tombstone, Arizona, they took a fortune out of a stope under the main street. Here I go to file our claim! Free silver is worth a million!"

MARSHAL PENNYPACKER stared at the imprint of the coin on the bared ore. His grin grew even broader.

"Blaster," he said, "I thank you in the name of the United States Government."

"You thank me in—"

"You've struck free silver, all right, and if it ain't fool's silver like fool's gold, I reckon it is worth a whole lot. But you've struck it under the United States post office on land owned by the United States Government, and it belongs to the United States Government which no doubt will run you off a nice silver medal from it for discoverin' it. This ain't yores and Hippo's, Blaster."

"We catch your post-office robber 'Wanteds,' which you're too dim-witted to see through their beards, and Hippo and me get nothin' for it? We save your post office ninety thousand bucks, and we get nothin' for it?"

Blaster's face grew even wilder and his hair and beard seemed about to burst into flame.

"Your little pardner will get plenty from it," said Marshal Pennypacker. "The tale of his darin' exploit in that there tunnel will bring the biggest rush of cash beard trade to his shop the West ever seen. Over desert and mountain the customers will flock to him. His good fortune is made.

"But you, Blaster"—the marshall shook his head sadly—"it is like you thought you had a royal straight flush in spades and one of 'em turned out to be the deuce of clubs. I don't even think the Princess Mine will give you a raise in your dynamiter's wages for discoverin' a rival strike that may put 'em to shame. Maybe you even blasted yourself out of a job."

Blaster gulped. He fought for speech.

"This," he finally got out, "is too much!"

"But I'll buy you a drink at the Mesquite Saloon, even if I have to appropriate Government funds," said the marshal. "When I come back from the final details concernin' the prisoners at the calaboose. So long, Blaster. . . . You shoveled up the post office money, diggers? Bring it along to the jail for safe-keepin'."

He swung up through the floor and disappeared.

"Shall we follow, *mon ami?*" said Hippolyte. "Shall we seek ze upper air? Let us resort to *Maison* Petitpois."

"Not that way, Hippo," said Blaster dolefully. "Let's crawl back to Maison Pettypwah through the tunnel. I feel like a snake."

They emerged through the hole in *Maison* Petitpois' flooring and turned up the lamp wick.

"I feel like the wreck of all human hope," said Blaster dolefully. "A fortune in our hands and the Government drygulches it."

"Your barbarossa beard, *camarade!*" exclaimed Hippolyte. "Eet is ze wreck of all my 'opes! Ze desert sands 'ave ruin your beard and hair from ze explosion! Zey are steef wiz ze dirt. Climb into my chair, Blastaire, and I shall soothe and repair you wiz ze best egg shampoo in the West."

The minutes passed and on Blaster's head rose a great billow of creamy lather. His beard, resting in a neck basin, had disappeared under a similar soapy tide. The deft fingers of Hippolyte worked busily away, Hippolyte comforted.

"Zere, forget ze troubles. Ze calm, ze peace, eet descend on ze worried brow wiz ze shampoo and ze face cream massage."

A shattering crash resounded from next door. Blaster sat upright.

"That's from Parker's Drygoods Emporium!" exclaimed Blaster. "Is somebody tearin' it down."

"Howdy, gents."

The unprepossessing figure of One-Gallus Benny, the Mesquite swamper, filtered through the door. He held out a sheet of paper with one hand while using the other to keep his pants up, as usual.

"For you, Blaster, from Marshal Penny over to the Mesquite. Grab it."

MORE crashing sounded. The *Maison* Petitpois seemed to be overwhelmed by the splintering racket now coming from both sides. Blaster stared at the sheet. The message read:

> I hereby summons you both to a drink on the United States Government. It may own the post office strike, but Hippo owns his store and ground forty feet away. And you are his partner. Cheer up, Blaster, you did noble. Dig away like the rest of Eureka.
>
> Deputy Marshal John Pennypacker

Blaster leaped from the barber's throne in a bound. Neck basin and sheet went onto the floor. Eyes wildly glaring through the screen of lather he seized the crowbar leaning against the wall and jumped into the hole in the planking that had been left uncovered.

"Hippo! We forgot! Your *maison* will be over that silver hill spur at the post office if it ain't narrer as a lath! No wonder there is a crushin' and a smashin' goin' on all around. Every store owner on this side of the street has got up out of bed and is rippin' up his floor boards and diggin' to see if he is over the strike!"

The crowbar tore into the sand floor of the trench. It drove for six inches and stopped with a thud. It drove again, feet away, and thudded once more. Blaster climbed out of the hole, scattering a soapy foam in all directions.

"Hippo, the rock is there! The silver spur is there! You're rich!"

"You too are reech, Blastaire! We are partnairs, *mon ami!* You 'ave declare me in on your strike w'at ze Government took away, I declare you in on zis one. Eet ees ze same strike, aftair all. Petitpois and Breen, ze owners of ze Silvaire Shampoo Mine. *Quel nom!*"

"The crowd is now tearin' up the middle of Continental Street with pick-axes," announced One-Gallus Benny from the door.

Wild yells, shouts and blows accompanied the continued splintering of wood.

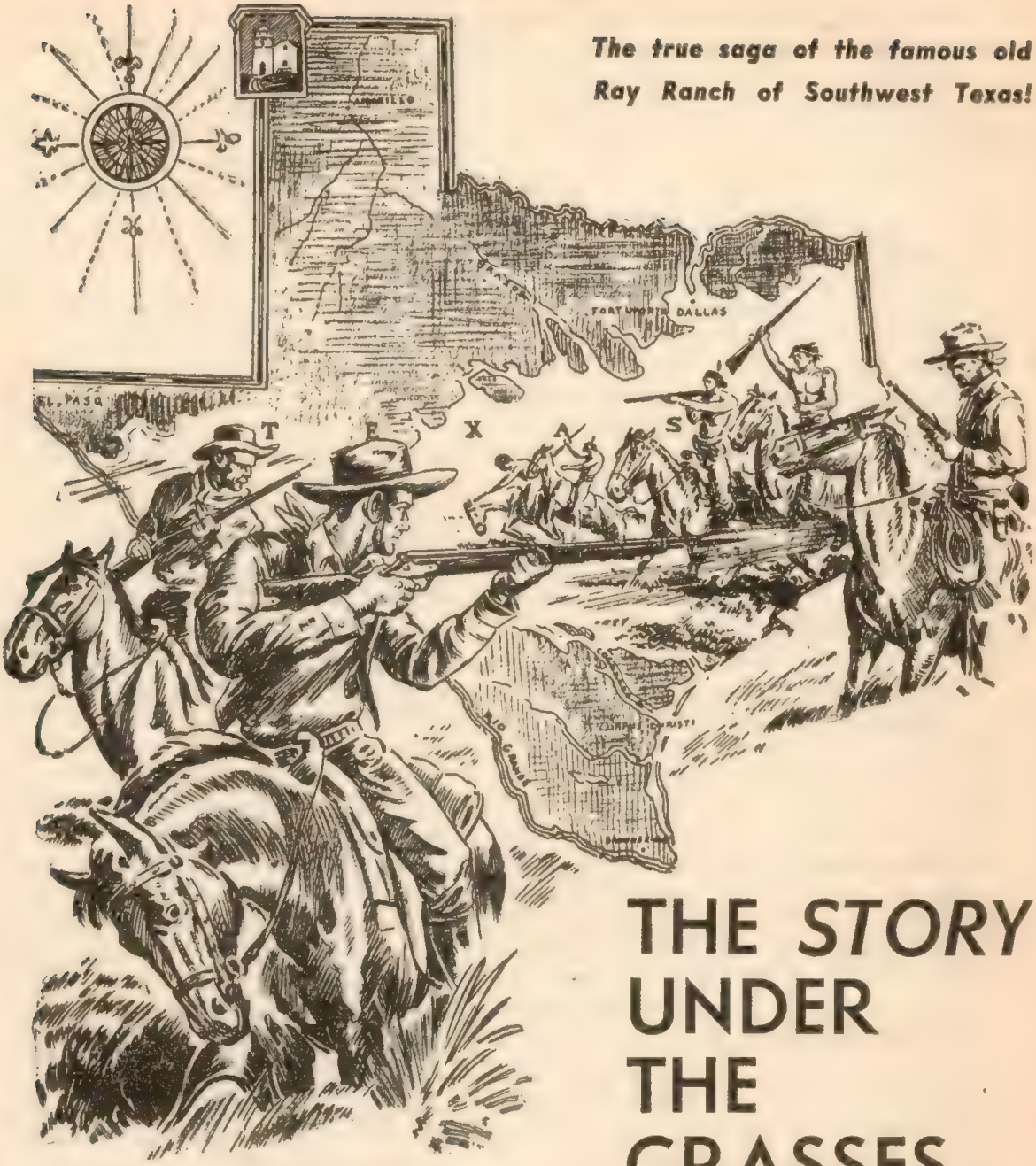
"There goes the floorin' of half of the buildin's on both sides," said Benny. "When I get back to the Mesquite I suppose they'll have that floor up, too and I'll be unemployed with nothin' to broom. This whole town will be tore down."

"Relax, Blastaire!" said Hippolyte happily. "Tomorrow we dig for ze silver. Tonight we feenish ze shampoo and zen we celebrate. W'at weel you do weeth all your fortune, Blastaire?"

Blaster's head went back under the fingers of Hippolyte. Contentedly he spread his huge frame in the barber's chair and now hardly more than his nose and mouth were visible under the foam.

"If it's a million dollars, which there ain't no reason it shouldn't be," gurgled Blaster, "I'm goin' to buy the United States Government and fire that cussed Marshal Penny."

The true saga of the famous old Ray Ranch of Southwest Texas!



THE *STORY* UNDER THE GRASSES

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by J. FRANK DOBIE

LOOKING at an old ranchhouse, a man will often wonder what human destinies have been associated with it. One of the well known ranches of southwest Texas, down in the brush country on the Nueces River, is the old Ray Ranch. My friend Rocky Reagan, of Beeville, has had this ranch leased for many years. The other night he told me the story of the founder of the ranch as he heard it thirty-seven years ago from a rancher, long since dead, who heard it from the original Ray away back in the Seventies.

So imagine yourself back some three quarters of a century, in a bachelor's ranch shack, where a bearded man with the eyes and step of early manhood is spending the night. He is a stranger to his host, but after supper he talks:

I'm not as old as I look. My home was in Alabama, and after the Civil War my father still had a good deal of property. He was a merchant and he had a partner. This partner had appeared to be honest and certainly he had been energetic and capable.

But then my father discovered signs of dishonesty in him and decided to sell out to a Yankee with hard cash. The partner was his junior by twelve or fifteen years. His name was Hess. A bull-like build and a red face marked him among other men.

Texas Lures Ray Brothers

From the time I began to dream about adventures, I had wanted to go to Texas, and my brother, Wallace, and I often talked of how we were going to the frontier when we grew up. In eighteen sixty-eight he was eighteen and I was twenty. About this time we began to hear accounts of the great cattle drives out of Texas, and we wanted more than ever to go to the land of ranches and trails and ride with its riders.

Finally my father said: "Since you boys are bound to go to Texas, I want you to go prepared. Your mother and I have talked the matter over. We have enough to live on and to take care of your sisters. We're going to give each of you five thousand dollars in gold for a stake."

In those days five thousand dollars was a snug fortune. As we found when we got to Texas, it would buy a thousand heifer yearlings, and there was plenty of free grass to run them on. Before we set out, each got a good six-shooter and rifle, the best grade of clothing, and a Bible that Mother was careful to see packed. We figured that we could do a good deal better in Texas on saddles and other horse equipment.

FATHER had a fine money belt made for each of us, a belt that would hold five thousand dollars in gold. When filled with the coins, it was plenty heavy. We wore ours under shirt and trousers, but any observant eye could have detected the belt. I don't know how Hess learned of the gold and the belts; I believe he was the only person in the country besides our parents who knew about them. He disappeared four or five weeks before we left Alabama.

We went down the Mississippi River to New Orleans and there caught a boat to Indianola, on the Texas coast. Here we found freight wagons from San Antonio and other places to the north and west. Indianola was booming. The stores offered everything a frontiersman wanted. We spent several days looking around, getting the lay of the land and completing our outfits. Long before we left Alabama it had been our plan to go into the Mexican country up the Nueces River. One night in a wagonyard at Indianola I overheard talk that led me to believe Hess had been in this place and gone on west. This was surprising, but at the time we thought little of the matter.

Finally we had two extra good Spanish horses, coyote duns, well broken and in good flesh, cowboy saddles, leggings, boots and spurs, a Mexican poncho and a Saltillo blanket apiece. Extra clothing was to be carried rolled up in the blanket and tied behind the saddle. Cartridges and some food—principally crackers, coffee, and sugar, for we could get meat off the country—were to be carried in a morral, the bag that swung from nearly every saddle horn in the country. We traded off the heavy Alabama rifles for short, lighter ones that could be carried in saddle scabbards, just then coming into general use.

We set out with a wagon train headed for Beeville, though some of the wagons were to go on up the country from that place. The traveling was slow for eager young riders like us, but there was plenty to see. The coastal prairies were dotted with deer, cattle and wild horses; prairie chickens constantly flew out of the grass

along the road. The earth was a carpet of grass belly high. Though September had come, the grass was still green. All the streams were clear. We didn't see any timber brush except along streams until we got into the post-oak country.

Brothers Venture Alone

At Beeville we bought a few more provisions and cut loose from the freighters to prospect alone. We knew there were a few ranches west of the Nueces—very few. Our idea was to locate perfection out in this vast vacancy. We crossed at what later was known as Barlow's Ferry—there was no ferry there then—and made camp under some live-oak trees. In this part of the country we frequently glimpsed mustang cattle, most of them black and line-backed, all literally wilder than the deer and as unclaimed. On the unending prairies bands of mustangs were constantly in sight. Wild turkeys were commoner than jackrabbits.

We had gone a day's ride on up country from the Nueces crossing without seeing a sign of a ranch. A big rain of the night before had washed out whatever tracks there were. A little before sundown we were sloping down to a line of timber that we took to mark a big creek, when all of a sudden eighteen riders came at us in a dead run, shooting and yelling. (I didn't count them at first glance.) We turned toward a brushy draw to the left of us, but the heavy ground had jaded our horses. While we ran we turned in the saddles and shot at our attackers. I don't think either of us made a single hit. Once, in turning, I got a glimpse of a hatless red face with a red bandana tied around the forehead.

Then my brother, Wallace, was down under a dead horse. For half a minute I stopped to try to get him loose, but he seemed to be shot in the lungs. I couldn't possibly save him. I made it into the brush. My horse stumbled, and as I cleared him I decided that the best thing for me to do would be to let him go in one direction and me in another. I jumped into a hard-bottomed gully and ran up into a kind of cove absolutely protected from view. All I had was the six-shooter, and only one unfired cartridge was in it.

I heard the Indians riding all around me and knew they had caught my horse. Then it was dark, clouds covering the sky. After a while I half crawled, so as to keep my body from being skylighted, back to where my brother had fallen. Occasionally I could hear a voice from the creek timber. I found my brother's body. It was not mutilated, but some of his clothes had been removed and his money belt was gone. That was significant, because I knew that scalps were prized by Comanches, not money-belts.

Fight at Creek

When daylight came, I was hidden in tall grass back of some bushes so that I could get a view of the camp. The men were bringing in hobbled horses. I saw my coyote dun among them. The men were Indians all right, all but one—the one with a red face and the bandana around his forehead. He was Hess, and he seemed to be the leader. How he had got in with the Indians will always be a puzzle to me, but it was probably through one of those chains of horse thieves operating clear across Texas into the old Southern States.

The riders were evidently going to cross the creek and go on west. The creek was up—big swimming. The excitement among the Indians over swimming the stream was so great that I got nearer without any danger of being seen. The horses were blindfolded and pushed off the bank, all but two or three that could be made to leap in with riders on their backs. Some of the men swam free, some holding the tails of the horses. The opposite bank was sloping, making climbing out easy.

When the last man emerged, I held my six-shooter with both hands so as to steady it, and aimed at Hess; but I don't think the bullet even grazed him. It was part of my plan to show myself. I stood up and yelled, and one of the bullets that replied to me

went through the fleshy part of my left thigh, bringing only a little blood. I fell down in the grass as if killed. And now the whole pack plunged back after me, leaving their horses on the opposite side. The swimmers were due some difficulty in climbing out, and naturally the stream carried them downward. Crawling back so that the brush would hide my movements, I ran upstream a short distance, leaped in and was across with the horses while some of the Indians were still clambering out on the side I had left.

I got on my horse, gave the others an ineffectual scare, and rode. This time I had the advantage, but I soon realized that it would be at best only a few hours until I was trailed down, if I kept traveling. My course was down the creek. After galloping maybe two miles, I discovered that I had ridden into a slew roughly paralleling the Nueces. Unknown to me then, the Nueces makes a big bend in this region, and I was much nearer it than I had supposed.

The slew was wide, but only in the middle was it deep. I rode up it several hundred yards so as to hide the tracks of my horse. Then I crossed and followed up a shallow arm of water, the country all being flattish here. I stopped in a motte of trees and granjeno brush, satisfied that my trail was well concealed. It was. I stayed there all day without seeing a man and heard only one yell.

The rifle was still in the scabbard on my saddle. The cartridges had all been removed from the morral. All it contained was a few water-soaked crackers, but they tasted good. The next morning I decided to ride down the slew. My horse seemed about played out, but I found a patch of mesquite grass fringed on three sides by brush and unsaddled and staked him.

Finds Hess' Body

Where was I going anyhow? Something made me restless to get back to the creek crossing where I had last seen my enemies and near which my brother Wallace's body lay. I was as alone as Robinson Crusoe on his island. I had a kind of yearning even for the tracks of my enemies. Leaving six-shooter and money belt hidden with the saddle, I tied the rifle on a log and, pushing it ahead of me, swam across the slew and made my way up the creek which I thought, should bring me to civilization.

Tracks were all I saw, and a buzzard in an old dead tree on the creek bank a little distance below the crossing. He flew away as I neared him. The water had gone down so that I didn't have to swim to cross. I carried my brother's body to the head of a gully, wrapped my shirt around his head and worked for hours digging dirt with my pocket knife to cover the body. Then I carried driftwood from the creek to place as best I could over the dirt.

When I started back down the creek, the buzzard again flew out of the old dead tree. I had enough curiosity to go to it. At its base was a mound of drift. Almost covered up by the drift, a patch of red caught my eye. I yanked out a few sticks. The patch expanded into a bandana. It was still around Hess' head. Presumably the current had pulled him under on his return across the creek while I was riding away from the crossing. The only care I had for his body was to remove from it the money belt he had taken from my brother.

The day was closing when I got back to my horse. That night another heavy rain fell. I spent the hours wretchedly cold and wet and hungry. Never was clear, warm sunlight more welcome to man than that I saw and felt the next morning. As the sun came up I saw two big old gobblers making passes at each other while other gobblers circled around them. The sheen on their feathers was wonderfully bright. I pulled the rifle out of the scabbard and got meat. The fact that I didn't have a dry match and that there wasn't a dry piece of wood in the country even if I had had matches, did not keep me from enjoying prime turkey.

My only course as I saw it was to get to fire and food. I rode over to the river, for

I knew that if I went down it far enough I would reach people. Right there I had an idea. I unsaddled my horse and turned him loose, hobbling him. I hid my saddle and the two money belts. I lashed some drift logs together with my rope. They were crooked and of uneven length, but they would hold me up. With a pole to steer with and with my rifle tied to the raft by one end of the rope, I shoved out into the current.

Drifts Down River

I might have to go all the way to Corpus Christi before finding a human habitation. I didn't know. It was an immense relief to be moving. Every once in a while it would veer into tree tops along the bank or get into eddies, but as long as I could keep the raft in the middle of the stream it went fast.

After I had been on the river about two hours, the raft made a headlong plunge towards the inside bank at an almost right-angle curve. Some of the logs had already worked loose in the roping. As they hit the bank, they twisted apart, and before I knew it raft and rifle had left me and I was holding on to a root growing out of the bluff. By straining at roots I was able to get my elbows on the bank and pull myself out.

After my breathing became normal, I walked out for a view. I thought I had never seen a prettier sweep of country than I could take in from this bend of the Nueces where I stood. And while I was watching some deer grazing, I saw a rider. He carried himself like a white man. I yelled, showing myself. He approached cautiously to within about two hundred yards and then waved his hat for me to come to him. Every man in the country was alert in those days.

To shorten the story, the rider was the owner of a ranch five or six miles away. He was looking for a saddle horse that he suspected of having taken up with the mustangs. At his ranch I ate and slept for two days. He was the kind of man you could trust. Lending me a horse and saddle, he rode with me to recover my horse and the ten thousand dollars in the two money-belts.

The only ranch location I wanted was where I had pulled up from the destroyed raft. I settled right there and built my house over the bluff. I stocked the range with sheep. All this took two years and more. Then I went to Alabama to marry the girl I had left behind me. She had given me up and married another. So with two or three Mexicans to help me, I live alone on the ranch. The dun horse with a line down his back that I rode out of Indianola on a day that seems generations ago and that shared later experiences will be glad to see me when I get back.

And that is the story of the Ray Ranch. Many and many another ranch has a human and dramatic tale sleeping under its grasses.

•

The Making of a Western Song

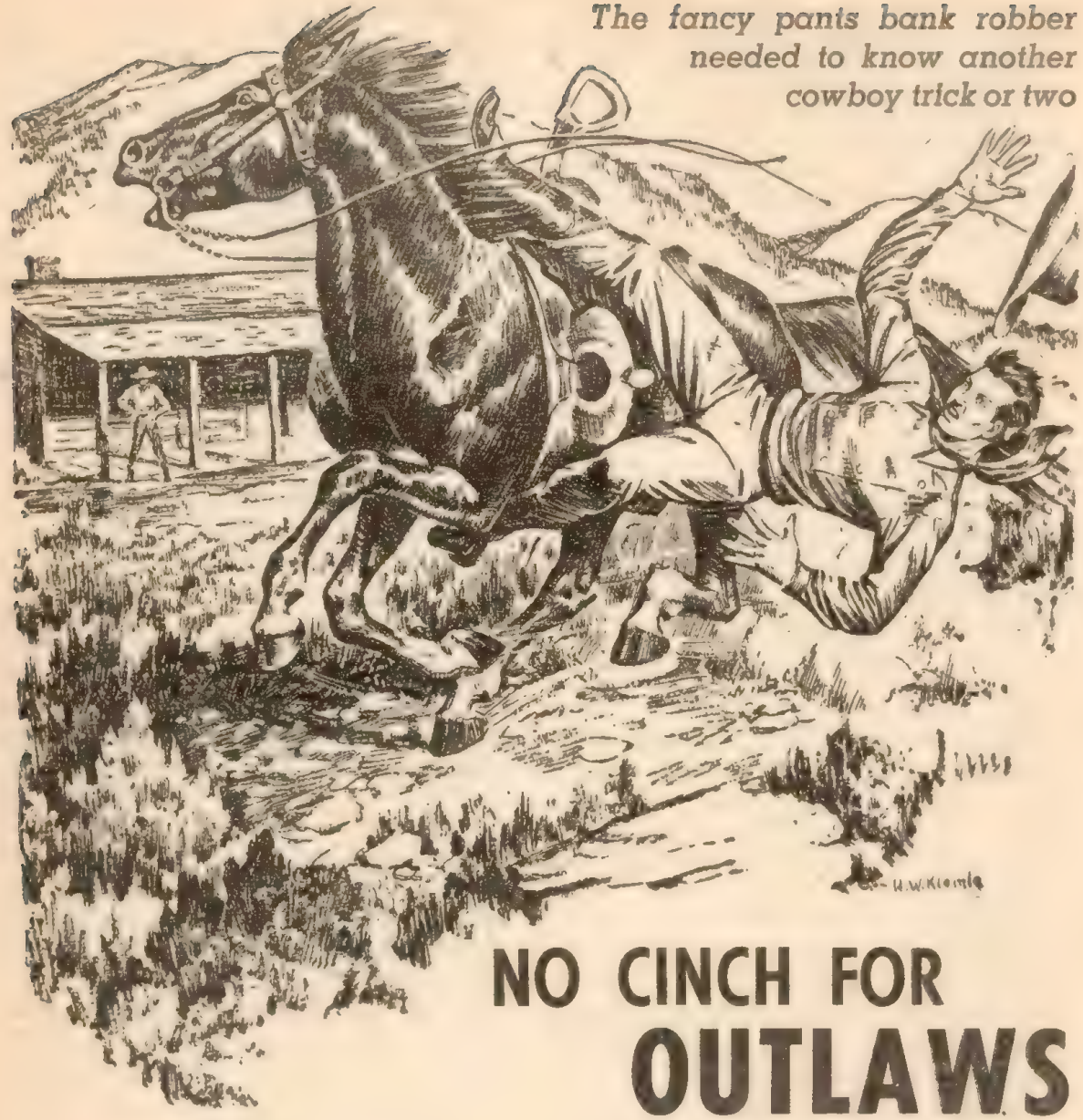
DURING the buffalo hide boom of the 1870s, when fashion decreed the use of buffalo robes for carriages and sleighs, hundreds of men rushed to the plains to hunt the beasts.

So devastating was the subsequent slaughter, that immense herds quickly disappeared. By the 1880s, the bleached bones of these slaughtered beasts were scattered so thickly in the grass of these flat Western plains that a newcomer, gazing on them for the first time, might liken them to white lilies.

Many early settlers added to their meager incomes by gathering these bones and shipping them to factories where they were ground up into fertilizer. And these same bone harvesters gave to Western folk music a pathetic ballad—The Bone Hunters—which they composed and sang while working.

—Norman Renard.

The fancy pants bank robber needed to know another cowboy trick or two



NO CINCH FOR OUTLAWS

by SAMUEL MINES

HORSE wrangler "Ace-High" Gerber, of the Bar Nothing Dude Ranch, got a better grip on his dude's lapels and pushed him into a chair.

"Like I was sayin'," Gerber drawled, "no matter how smart a man is, when he gets out of his own territory he's liable to make a fool of himself. Now when I was sheriff of Buena Vista County—"

"Very interesting, I'm sure," the dude said, struggling to extricate his buttonhole from the old man's tenacious finger. "But don't detain me!"

"Let 'em go," Ace-High said serenely, holding his victim fast. He cast a glance at the dude's horse which, saddled and bridled, stood nearby with drooping head. "I suppose you're just rarin' to leap into that there saddle and go gallopin' off after

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them she-dudes, ain't you?"

"Well after all, I'm up here to ride."

"Uh-huh, just like I thought."

Without giving the dude a chance to escape, old Ace-High brought up a chair and got himself seated in such a position that his bony knees kept his quarry from escaping.

"Like I was sayin'," he began comfortably, fishing out a blackened corncob pipe, "a man had ought to stick to the things he knows, or he's headed straight for disaster. Reminds me of a feller I once knowed, when I was sheriff of Buena Vista County."

With an inward groan the dude saw his riding party disappear around a bend of the trail. Presently even their gay shrieks and laughter were blown away by the wind. He gave up and relaxed, as the ex-sheriff went on with his tale. . . .

* * * * *

This feller, name of Sheldon Blakelee, was a fancy pants bank robber from the East. He was knowed as the "Dude" because even out there his clothes would have given a color-blind cat the fits. Howsomever, he was mighty good at his trade which was crackin' cribs, as they say in the vernacular of crime. So when I got a flash that the East had grown plenty hot for Dude and he was headin' out this way, why, my interest was some aroused, you might say.

Now Dude, for all his fancy pants, was a mighty smart and cool hombre. Knowin' he was about to take up a residence in the West, and bein' from the city and plumb ignorant of Western customs, he went to some trouble to prepare himself.

He went to one of them tanbark ridin' schools and learned to stick on a cayuse. He shucked his plaid jackets and striped pants and Tattersal vests and got hisself some denims and a brush jacket out of a mail-order catalogue. All this I learned later, of course, but I'm puttin' it in the right place so's you can see what a mighty smart hombre this Dude was.

He run into a piece of bad luck out Wichita way though. The Law got a tip from somebody who recognized him and a raid was made on the hotel. Dude got down the drain-pipe half a minute ahead of the Law, leavin' his baggage and all his cash in the room and carryin' only the clothes on his back and the burglar tools which he always wore in a belt around his middle.

So when Dude pulled into the town of Buena Vista, which same was the county seat of Buena Vista County, he was ridin' the rods on a freight train, with about fifteen cents in his pocket.

He invested the fifteen cents in coffee and wheat cakes at the Bon Ton Diner, which Margie Sharp remembers waitin' on him and thinking he was a bum on account of his clothes and the dust and all.

THEN he sashayed out to look the town over. And the first thing he sees is the Stockmen's National Bank, big as life and twice as natural. It is bustin' with currency, fat and sassy as a three-year-old, and plumb easy-goin', never having been held up or otherwise damaged in all its career.

Well sir, life takes on new meanin' for Dude and there's a song in his heart again. Where there's a bank there is prosperity for Dude, even if it means other people get plumb poorer in the proposition.

To add to his pleasure, the Come Again Saloon is just across the way from the bank and at the hitch-rack of the Come Again is always a choice collection of hosses from every ranch in the county.

Dude sizes up the situation and lays his plans accordin'. He picks the hour of noon when things slow down and is their sleepiest in Buena Vista. There is only one man on duty in the bank. There is the usual sprinklin' of cayuses at the hitch-rack across the way and amongst them is a big rangy black that has got lots of speed and bottom.

Dude looks 'em over, and though he ain't no expert on hossflesh, he makes a pretty good guess that the black can outrun anything at present in town. So he's all set—the job planned and the get-a-way

right to hand. Not bein' a Westerner, he didn't know that stealing a hoss is a worse crime than robbin' a bank, but even if he did, it wouldn't have made no difference. Dude was always a little quick on the trigger and he was wanted for a couple killin's so he expected to be hung if he was ever caught.

About ten minutes of noon I am standin' outside my office and turnin' over the proposition in my mind whether it would be better to go fishin' or look for them twins of Missus Hammerschlag's that are always runnin' away, when I see Dude stroll down the street and go into the bank.

This excites my attention because a stranger is somethin' a good sheriff keeps an eye on. So I start to walk down that way.

Meanwhile as Rafferty, the cashier, tells us when the excitement is over, Dude steps up to the wicket where he is alone, and shoves a short-barreled thirty-eight between the bars.

"Hand over all your currency, quick!" guns or bells and don't make no sudden motions!"

Rafferty sees he is dealin' with a professional, so he makes out to obey orders. He scoops up a couple bundles of bills from his drawer, leavin' most of it behind. Dude can't see from where he is standin', but the amount makes him mad.

"That all?" he snarls. "Come out from behind there. You're gonna open the safe!"

Rafferty comes out. He walks back to the safe with the Dude's gun in his ribs. He spins the combination and the big steel door opens. As soon as it opens, the Dude nudges him aside and begins liftin' out packages of bills. Dude's attention bein' occupied, Rafferty jumps behind the shield of the big steel door and makes a dive for the alarm bell.

"Why, you dirty—" yelps the Dude, steps out from the edge of the door and lets drive with his .38. The slug catches Rafferty in the leg and spills him like a roped maverick.

Down the street I hear the shot and break into a run. I see the Dude bust out of the bank, clutchin' a sack. Right off I think of the notices I got that the famous bank robber was headin' my way.

"Great gobs of molasses!" I gasp. "He's got here all right!"

With which I haul my shootin' iron out of holster. Dude ain't waitin'. He slams a shot at me with his .38 and, Easterner or no Easterner, he can shoot. The slug goes past my cheek so close that it gives me a considerable closer shave than I can get with my old straight razor.

I shoot back, but my aim has been somewhat disrupted and I miss, so I jump for the cover of the barber pole, which I have just reached. Meantime, Dude runs straight across the street to the hitch-rack and grabs loose the reins of the black.

Somebody inside the saloon shouts and the doors start to swing open. Dude slams a shot into the opening, there is a yell, and the doors swing shut pronto whilst everybody inside scrambled out of the way.

I have a pretty clear view for a head shot of the bank robber, but I don't shoot. Shucks, why waste lead when I see what the dang fool is doin'?

He yanks loose the reins, grabs the horn and lifts himself into the saddle. The sack of money is hooked someway over the horn in front of him.

He yanks the black around, sends another shot at me which goes through the plate glass window behind me, and makes old Amos Wellby, the barber, duck for cover and cuss.

"So long, hayseed!" the Dude yells, insultin'-like. "Thanks for an easy haul!"

WITH which he spurs out into the road in a wild gallop. I slip my forty-five back into its holster and step out into the street, grinnin'. I don't want to miss none of this.

The black roars down the road like a locomotive, legs pumping, mane and tail flyin'. I reckon he is doin' close to a hundred mile an hour. Fifty yards he goes—the saddle twists around and goes under his belly and Dude Blakelee goes flying into the roadway like a sack of meal. He

bounces eight times, rolls over seven more, and fetches up against the front of Schneider's Meat Market and Fancy Groceries, with a crash that can be heard clean to the railroad station.

He don't move, and I don't hurry too much gettin' up there. I know he is knocked colder than a hound dog's nose. Fact, he is lucky if he hasn't busted a lot of valuable bones.

He doesn't come to till he is in court with the clerk readin' off the list of crimes charged to him, and he is so shattered by his experiences that he don't make much of a defense. This is kind of a disappointment to me, figurin' there'd be some right excitin' revelations, so to speak.

But it just goes to show, son, like I was sayin', that a man, no matter how smart and no matter how much care he takes, is headin' for trouble when he steps out of his own bailiwick.

Now. . . .

* * * * *

"Very interesting, very entertaining," the dude who had been listening mumbled hurriedly. "Now if you please, I have to—"

With a final desperate heave, he managed to extricate his knees and free himself. He made a dash for his horse.

"But you didn't—don't you want to know what happened to Dude?" Ace-High yelled.

"Some other time," the dude snapped. "I'm in a hurry."

He gathered up the reins of his horse and climbed hurriedly into saddle. At the touch of his heels the pony lurched into movement. Five jumps he made, the saddle twisted around under his belly, and the dude hit the short grass, bounced twice and slithered to a halt.

"See what I mean?" old Ace-High said, picking him up.

"Huh? Wha—who?"

"What I was tryin' to tell you," the wrangler insisted. "No man in the West can come up to a cayuse, climb aboard and ride off. It just can't be done. Why? 'Cause a rider always loosens the cinch strap on his hoss whenever he stops. He does it to let the critter breathe. First thing he does when he comes out again is to tighten up that cinch strap. Otherwise the saddle turns—as both you and Dude Blakelee found out."

"B-but you saddled my horse!"

"Sure I saddled your nag. But you-all was still eatin' breakfast and I wouldn't let no horse stand out there waitin' with a tight cinch strap. That's what I was tryin' to tell yuh when you was in such a gosh-awful hurry to get away. Now you got a cheaper lesson than Dude, which was hung by the neck."

"I think mine's broken," groaned the dude. "Help me in. I'm going to bed."

"Tchk, tchk," clucked the old sheriff. "Sure hope you can stay in that."

•

Lost Nation

SOME sixty years ago or so a group of Canadians, mostly from the town of Nation, decided to resettle in the United States where the odds seemed better. At the western edge of Clinton County, Iowa, they started up their new settlement. Tentatively they planned to call their new home New Nation. Meanwhile they sent for relatives.

Early the next spring the relatives started out from Nation, Canada, for what might some day be called New Nation, United States. It took them almost into summer to find the tiny settlement. When they did find it, they suggested that a far more appropriate name might be Lost Nation, and Lost Nation, Iowa, it is! It even shows on some maps. —*Mark Knight*

Mack Jessen takes a whirl at being a deputy sheriff all because he's plumb—

Boley pitched forward across the fire

TIRED OF HORSES

By DANE ZALE

MACK JESSEN sat on an old wooden chair propped up against the front of his livery stable and hated everything and everybody around him. He was tired of horses, sick of the weather-beaten buildings that lined either side of the little cowtown. It was all so monotonous that it was getting on his nerves.

How long had it been now that he had owned and run the livery stable in Big Boulder? Ten years, fifteen, no, it was even more than that, and it hadn't been the sort of life he wanted to lead at all.

Jessen tugged at an end of his shaggy gray mustache and watched Shell Foster come out of the sheriff's office across the street. There was an air of authority about the big, broad shouldered lawman. Shell Foster never left any doubt in anyone's mind that he was the sheriff of Sage County.

He strode across the street with that important swagger that was so much a part of his nature. Jessen waited silently. Foster had the job that the stable-keeper had always wanted. For years Mack Jessen had clung to the dream of being a lawman. It was the danger and excitement that could be and frequently was part of the job that fascinated him.

He didn't want to take Shell Foster's position of sheriff away from him, but he longed to hold one like it. Months ago he had told the sheriff his dream in a mistaken burst of confidence and Shell Foster had never let him forget—even if Jessen had wanted to do so.

"Morning, Mack," Foster said as he halted in front of Jessen. "Still figuring how you can take over my job?"

"Don't tell me you're still worrying about that, Sheriff," Jessen said dryly. "And with all the serious things you've got on your mind!"

Foster frowned. There hadn't been any reason for the lawman to go into action during the past month or so. Big Boulder and the surrounding county had been unusually peaceful and quiet. The sheriff was a good man when it came to tangling with gunmen and owlhoots but he couldn't enjoy a tranquil existence.

"I have got something serious on my mind, Mack," Foster said. "Did two strangers leave their horses here at the stable for you to take care of, affer they rode into town last night."

"They did," said Jessen, growing interested. "One feller said his name was Joe

Boley and the other was Weaver Stringer."

"You mean they told you their names?" The sheriff stared at the stable-keeper in amazement. "I didn't think they would have the nerve to do that."

THE stable-keeper stared back at the sheriff with bland assurance.

"Why not?" Jessen demanded. "What's wrong about those men telling their names?"

"Joe Boley and Weaver Stringer are a couple of dangerous outlaws," Foster said. "Wanted men, with a price on their heads. I've got reward dodgers in my office for them."

"Then why don't you arrest them?" Jessen asked. "They are still in town—unless they left without taking their horses—which I don't figure they are likely to do."

"Aim to try and catch them in some crime," said the sheriff. "You see, far as I know, their names aren't Boley and Stringer. They registered at the hotel as Joe Smith and W. Brown last night. Maybe they figure on robbing the bank or one of the saloons in town and I might catch them in the act."

In Jessen's estimation there was something decidedly wrong about the sheriff not wanting to arrest a couple of wanted men on sight, but the stable keeper decided Foster probably knew what he was doing. Jessen was sure it wasn't the way he would act if he was a lawman.

"Those men should be watched all of the time," Foster said. "And I can't do it. At least not all the time. Too bad my deputy went East on a vacation and won't be back for another week yet." A thought seemed to strike the sheriff. "You claim you have a hankering to be a lawman, Mack. How about acting as my unofficial deputy?"

"Doing what?" Jessen asked.

"Keeping watch on Boley and Stringer when I'm not on the job," said the sheriff. "You sit out here in front of the stable quite a bit and see everything that goes on in town. You could watch those two men and report to me if you notice anything suspicious, Mack."

There was a strange expression on Shell Foster's big face. He looked like he was trying to keep from smiling or even laughing. Jessen didn't like it. The sheriff's sudden desire to have the old stable owner act as his deputy didn't ring quite true.

"How about it, Mack?" Foster asked when he saw that Jessen seemed to be thinking it over. "Will you take the job as unofficial deputy?"

"No," said Jessen firmly. "Not if you make it unofficial, Shell."

"What do you mean?" the sheriff looked surprised. "I don't understand?"

"Suppose something should happen to you," Jessen said. "What if you got in a gunfight with those two men and they downed you, Sheriff?"

"That's not likely to happen," said Foster. "But what of it?"

"With your deputy away and you dead there would be no Law in Big Boulder or Sage County either," Jessen said, getting to his feet, heavy-set, gray haired and looking a lot like a mule with a mustache. "I wouldn't have any authority to arrest the hombres who downed you if I caught them." He nodded. "Tell you what, Sheriff. If you will officially swear me in as your deputy until Johnny Lake gets back and takes over his job, I'll watch those men for you like you want me to do."

It was the sheriff's turn to hesitate before speaking. He thought for a moment, and then nodded.

"All right, Mack," he said. "I'll do it. I appoint you deputy sheriff right here and now. Hold up your right hand." The sheriff voiced the words that made the old stable keeper an officer of the law as Jessen repeated them after him. "That makes you my deputy, Mack."

"Thanks, Sheriff," Jessen said. "I sure aim to perform my duties to the best of my ability."

"Have an extra deputy's badge in a drawer in my office," said Foster. "I'll give it to you later, Mack."

"All right," Jessen said. "Now I'll keep watch on those two men like you said to do, Sheriff."

"You do that," Foster said as he left.

The stable-keeper again seated himself in his chair and tilted it back against the front wall of the barn. Mack Jessen a real deputy sheriff! He had never felt quite so important before in his life. The old dream had finally been realized—and it sure made a man feel good.

HE WATCHED the sheriff stride back across the street toward his office. It was easy to understand now how being a lawman made Shell Foster feel important. Mack Jessen was beginning to feel the same way himself. He had a hankering to get that deputy's badge as soon as possible, but the sheriff might laugh at him if he was too anxious about it. Better wait awhile. Foster had said he would have the badge for him later.

Jessen's eyes narrowed as he saw the two strangers come out of the Royal Flush Saloon and head across the street toward the stable. He hadn't liked those two when they left their horses at the stable last night, and he still didn't.

They were both big men. Weaver Stringer was a little heavier than Joe Boley and they had hard faces. They wore worn range clothes and the guns in the holsters at their hips looked like they had seen plenty of use.

But it was by the way they treated their horses that Jessen judged them. Stringer rode a bay and Boley a roan. Both horses bore too many scars of spurs that had bitten in too deep, and their mouths showed cruel hands had handled the reins. The bay and the roan had been ridden hard and far before they had reached the stable last night, but the two men had given Jessen no orders to give the horses a rub down when they left their mounts with him.

"Sorry to interrupt your morning sleep, Grandpa," Stringer said as the two men reached the front of the stable. "Saddle our horses pronto. We're getting out of here."

[*Turn page*]

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"That's right," said Boley. "This town is too quiet for us. We like a heap more excitement than we have found in Big Boulder."

"I'll get your horses," Jessen said, as the front legs of the chair hit the ground with a little thump. "I've got a feeling that Big Boulder won't even miss you when you're gone."

"Let's go see the sheriff, Joe," said Stringer. "Got some business to talk over with him before we leave."

"The left hind shoe on your bay is pretty loose, Boley," Jessen said. "Only a couple of nails in it. You better get it fixed."

"Seems to be holding all right," Boley said, as he turned away. "I won't bother."

Jessen shrugged as the two men headed across the street to the sheriff's office and Foster's new deputy went into the stable. He got the bay and the roan out of their stalls and started saddling them. He took his time about putting the rigging on the horses. In fifteen minutes the bay and the roan were ready to ride.

He heard footsteps and then the murmur of voices out on the street and then Stringer and Boley stepped into the stable.

"So you have got our horses ready," Stringer said. "Didn't think you would be able to do it so fast, Grandpa."

"Me neither," said Boley. "This old walrus must be able to get around quicker than we thought, Weaver."

The two men picked up their reins and swung into their saddles, ready to ride out through the big open front door of the stable.

"That'll be a dollar each for keeping and feeding the horses," Jessen said.

"Tell you what, Grandpa," Stringer said heading his horse toward the door. "Just charge it."

"Yeah!" Boley laughed. "Charge it."

"No, you don't!" snapped Jessen. "You're not leaving town until I get my money."

He lunged toward the bay from the side with the intention of grabbing the horse's reins. Stringer pulled one booted foot out of the stirrup and gave Jessen a kick that knocked the old stable-keeper back against a bale of hay. Before he could get to his feet the two men had ridden out of the stable and he heard the pounding of their horses' hoofs grow fainter as they headed on out of town.

"That's no way to treat a deputy," Jessen muttered angrily.

JESSEN went to his office in the stable, opened an old trunk there and drew out a cartridge-belt with a holster attached. There was a long barreled Colt .45 in the holster. It had been years since Mack Jessen had worn a gun, but all the same he had kept that Colt oiled and ready. He buckled on the belt and loosened the gun in the holster. He was a lawman now, and there was authority behind that .45.

"All the same I'd feel better if I had my badge," he muttered. "Reckon I'll go see Foster about it."

He walked across the street and stepped into the sheriff's office and then stopped and stood staring. Shell Foster was sprawled back in the chair behind his desk, and there was a knife sticking in the sheriff's broad chest over his heart. Foster didn't look at all important in death.

Jessen stepped quietly forward as he recovered from the shock of his discovery. There was a deputy badge and a book that looked like a diary lying on the desk. The old stable keeper picked up the badge and pinned it on the left side of his vest.

"I'm sorry, Shell," he said. "Never figured anything like this might happen. I'll get those killers, pronto."

Jessen opened the diary, curious as to whether the sheriff might have left some last message. He found a page that bore the day's date, and read what was written there.

" 'Played a good joke on Mack Jessen,' " Jessen read aloud. " 'He has been so anxious to be a lawman that when he told me the names of those two strangers in town—Joe Boley and Weaver Stringer —I pretended they were dangerous—bad-

ly wanted men. Actually I never heard of either of them before. But Mack was so serious about it that I swore him in as my deputy—and that part of it is no joke. He is a real lawman for the time being at least. Be strange if those two men really are wanted—I'll have to look through my wanted dodgers and see if I can find any description of them. That's funny—those two men are heading for my office now.' "

The writing stopped abruptly and Jessen put down the book. He was sorry that Foster had considered making him a deputy a joke—but the diary was proof that could be shown to the citizens of Big Boulder that right now Mack Jessen was the Law.

Half an hour later the people of the little cowtown knew that the sheriff had been murdered, and that Jessen had been appointed deputy. Jessen had been unable to find any trace of any wanted dodgers that described Stringer and Boley.

He went back to the livery stable, saddled one of his best horses and rode out of town alone, hoping to pick up the trail of a pair of killers. It had rained hard the previous day and night and the ground was still soft. That suited Mack Jessen fine.

Early one morning, two days and two nights later, Joe Boley and Weaver Stringer finished their breakfast, stamped out the fire and placed the coffee pot on the ground beside the ashes. They were carrying money they had stolen in the robbery of a bank ten miles east of Big Boulder. The cash was in two big gunnysacks lying on the ground near a boulder.

"I still don't see why you had to kill that sheriff at Big Boulder, Weaver," Boley said. "Even if he did show us those wanted dodgers and tell us we were under arrest, you didn't have to stab him. You could have just knocked him out."

"Oh, sure," said Stringer. "And give him a chance to trail after us when he regained consciousness. Don't forget the names on those dodgers aren't Stringer and Boley. Only one who knows our real names is that old stable keeper and

[*Turn page*]

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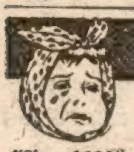

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he doesn't amount to shucks."

"Don't be so sure of that!" Mack Jessen said as he stepped out from behind a boulder, the gun in his hand covering the two men. "I'm arresting you two for murder."

Stringer grabbed for his gun. He tossed the weapon aside and raised his hands as Jessen fired a bullet close to Stringer's left ear. Boley cursed and drew his Colt. He had the gun raised, ready to down the old stablekeeper when Jessen shot him in the chest.

Boley's knees buckled and he pitched forward across the ashes of the fire and sprawled there motionless.

"How did you find us?" Stringer asked, staring at the badge on Jessen's vest.

"Told you the left hind shoe on Boley's horse was kind of loose," Jessen said. "Could see the holes where the missing nails should have been in the tracks your horses made in the soft ground. Lost you yesterday near the town where you robbed the bank—but managed to pick up the trail again, seeing as it rained some more last night."

He walked over to make sure that Boley was dead. Stringer thrust one hand beneath his vest. A knife flashed through the air—the blade missing Jessen by inches as he ducked to one side. He fired as Stringer grabbed up his gun. The big man went down—a bullet in his heart.

Mack Jessen shuddered as he stood there. It didn't seem that he liked being a lawman half as much as he always thought that he would. There was too much killing and risking being killed to it for an old man. Tending his stable was a better job for him. Shucks, horses were right friendly if you treated them right, and they never thought a man's dreams were a joke as Shell Foster had done.

"Now where did I get the loco idea that I was tired of horses?" Jessen said softly.

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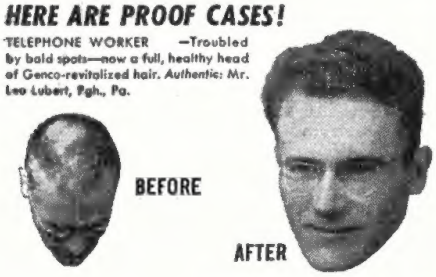

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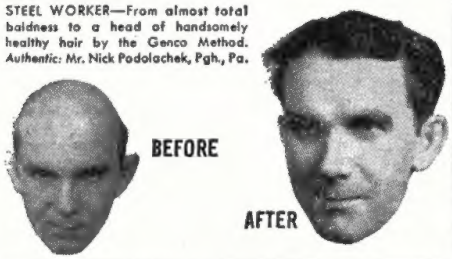

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